

The Re-presentation of History in the Works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke

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Abstract

This thesis considers the interpretation of history in the fictional works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke – three writers with very different places in the post-1989 canon of Chinese literature who have yet to be collectively addressed in contemporary Chinese literary criticism to date. The thesis considers the significant differences between Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’s as authors, and how the different modes of symbolically representing history in their respective works offer important perspectives on our understanding of how significant historic events are represented and reflected upon in contemporary Chinese fiction.

The thesis engages in a discussion of contemporary Chinese fiction, which combines the disciplines of history, politics and literature in order to understand how literature functions in contemporary China. To this end, Chapters Two and Three read Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006, translated by Howard Goldblatt) and Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma* (2008, translated by Flora Drew) in conjunction with their historical antecedents, demonstrating how the different ways in which Mo Yan and Ma Jian write about significant historical events manage to out-manoeuvre the political constraints imposed by the censorship mechanisms of the Communist Party of China (CPC). At the heart of this thesis’ discussion is Louisa Lim’s theory of ‘national amnesia,’ which describes the censorship mechanisms of the CPC. Chapter’s Two and Three build upon Lim’s thesis by considering the contested field of cultural discourse in contemporary China and how Chinese writers, such as Mo Yan and Ma Jian, might mitigate the ‘national amnesia’ of significant events in literature of the post-1989 period. Chapter Four analyses the issues of authorship, reception and metafiction in relation to the works of Yan Lianke and argues that Yan’s writing exhibits a new direction in Chinese literature by which Chinese writers may be able to use the

constructs of metafiction as a tool to circumvent the ideological guidelines and mechanisms of literary censorship which exist in China today.

Collectively, the works I analyse in the thesis support an argument that the allusions to significant historic events in the novels of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke are deeply embedded within historico-political discourses of twentieth- and twenty-first century China. The thesis argues that the allusions to historic events in the works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke may offer a means by which Chinese writers in the post-1989 period have been able to navigate the state-sponsored censorship of history under the authoritarian governance of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

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Introduction

This thesis considers the representation of historical events in the fictional works of Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), Ma Jian 马建 (b. 1953) and Yan Lianke 阎连科 (b. 1958). These are three writers with very different places in the post-1989 canon of Chinese literature who have yet to be collectively studied in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. The thesis considers the significant differences between Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke as authors, and how the different modes of symbolically representing history in their respective works demonstrate different ways of representing significant historic events in a country where the events of the past are highly politicised.

Julia Lovell (2012, p. 19) is the only critical voice to have grouped these three authors together under the umbrella of their fiction's political content and argues that 'for all their stylistic differences [Mo Yan, Yan Lianke and Ma Jian] are united by their obsession with Chinese politics, a creative preoccupation that risks subordinating individual, emotional experience to the big, collective story of modern nation-building'. Here, Lovell suggests that, despite their individual, authorial differences, Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's work are collectively preoccupied with their focus on Chinese politics. This thesis is a response to Lovell's suggestion and, by means of highlighting the similarities between these three writers, in terms of their public profiles, and analysing the methods by which each writer reflects historical events which arise within their respective works, aims to show how these authors collectively address politically sensitive periods of Chinese history within their literature, in the context of censorship under the Communist Party of China (CPC).

While this thesis focuses specifically on the recent fiction of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, it does not suggest that these three authors are the only contemporary writers active in addressing politically sensitive periods of Chinese history within their work.

However, as outlined in this introductory chapter, the connections between these authors and their works illustrate how an analysis of the historical events which are discussed in their fiction may help understand how literature functions under the censorship of the CPC.

One author whose work also addresses politically sensitive periods of Chinese history is Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (b.1973). Sheng's novel *Death Fugue* (2014, translated by Shelly Bryant) directly addresses the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. In Nicholas Jose's (2014) review of the novel, he claims that, in the context of writing under an oppressive system of authoritarian censorship, 'the first to break the rules ... is the author'. Yet, it is also perhaps the case for writers under authoritarian systems of governance that the first to be targeted is the author. *Death Fugue* is banned in mainland China for its fashioning of the Tiananmen crackdown into a stomach-churning allegory about how the People's Liberation Army (PLA) extinguished the student protest in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 (Perlez, 2019), a narrative much opposed to the CPC's official, state-sponsored conclusion to the 1989 student protests. An observation by Sheng's hero, Mengliu, highlights the intellectual turning point the Tiananmen Square crackdown raised for contemporary Chinese writers. Comparing the events of June Fourth to the trauma of the Holocaust, Mengliu observes that 'Theodor Adorno said that after Auschwitz, poetry was impossible', adding, 'but he later changed his mind'. As Jose elucidates in his review, Sheng adopts the title of Paul Celan's poem *Todesfuge* ("Death Fugue"), aligning with Celan's refutation of Adorno's famous aphorism: no literature after Tiananmen.¹ Yet, in *Death Fugue*, as in the post-1989 works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, we see how fiction renders historic events anew, establishing a creative space in which collective meaning can be conveyed to the reader. The genre of historical fiction in which the primary authors at the forefront of this thesis place their work is a narrative choice by which their fiction engages or, in the case of Ma Jian, challenges the

¹ Weimar, K. S. (1974). 'Paul Celan's "Todesfuge": Translation and Interpretation.' *PMLA*, 8(1), pp. 85-96.

Chinese government's censorship apparatus, a system which exhibits a predilection for deliberately editing and erasing history that does not fit its political narrative.

As such, while this thesis primarily engages in a discussion of contemporary Chinese fiction by three authors, it is also partly focussed on the authors themselves in order to understand how authorship and historical fiction functions under the constraints of the Chinese censorship apparatus. Collectively, the analysis of the works in this thesis supports an argument that the representations of historical events in Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's fiction are deeply embedded with each author's concern about the commodification of memory and history in the context of the state-sponsored narrative of twentieth- and twenty-first century China.

Western critical responses to literature produced under communist censorship, such as Veg's (2009) essay considering the symbolic manifestation of the Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo's 王小波 (1952-1997) *Huangjin shidai (The Golden Age)*, often refer to texts which are, within their respective contexts, considered politically antagonistic or didactically irreconcilable with the state. However, my three authors each exhibit a different relationship with the censorship mechanisms of the CPC. To this extent, the dynamic of each author's position within the Chinese censorship apparatus will be considered alongside the thesis's analysis of their respective texts.

In this thesis I analyse how Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke negotiate literary censorship, and how allusions to historically significant events within their texts are incorporated, in the context of the authoritarian system of censorship maintained by the CPC in contemporary China today. For the authors whose works I analyse in this thesis, the reassessment of China's modern history is deeply at work in their respective representations of significant historic events. Within the context of the authoritarianism of the CPC, the allusions in the historic novels of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke offer a means by which

Chinese writers in the post-1989 period may be able to regain control of and, as in Ma Jian's work, openly confront the state-sponsored narrative of history evident in China today.

The Problem of Censorship: Methodology and Context

Writing in the context of contemporary censorship in China, Margaret Roberts' *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (2018) proposes that a key contradiction exists between conventional knowledge about censorship and the reality of censorship itself. This contradiction, Roberts suggests, manifests itself in the lack of conceptual clarity about the mechanisms by which censorship affects the public's consumption of information.

A critical problem for academics whose work focuses on censorship, in its broadest sense, Roberts (2018, p. 5) argues, is that we lack an overarching 'theory of censorship'. *Censored* uses as its case study the context of censorship in China and disputes the generally accepted belief that the Chinese government exerts near-total control over the Internet. Instead, Roberts proposes that Beijing uses a system of 'porous censorship', achieved by techniques she labels 'fear, friction, and flooding' (pp. 5-6). The first, "fear", consists of threats and punishments aimed at deterring critics from posting content online; the second, "friction", which consists of blocks that make it difficult, but not impossible, for ordinary Internet users to access 'undesirable' content, and the third, "flooding", which involves inundating the Internet with information the government wants people to consume. Roberts' book argues that porous control is a more effective method of censorship than total control because it is less conspicuous and arouses little opposition. *Censored* focuses on contemporary censorship in the context of the Internet but her theoretical framework also

applies to China's censorship mechanisms in print and broadcast media as these forms of media have adapted over the course of the late twentieth- and twenty-first century.

This thesis primarily looks at the fiction of three Chinese authors whose work Lovell (2012) groups together as being collectively preoccupied with Chinese politics. Yet, despite their collective preoccupation with Chinese politics, each author exhibits a different relationship with China's censorship mechanisms. The variations between Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's experience of China's censorship apparatus highlight the different ways in which each author writes about politically sensitive topics within their work and offers an insight into how literature functions under censorship in contemporary China.

In the context of Mo Yan's, Ma Jian's and Yan Lianke's fiction, a distinction must be made early on between censorship and the banning of an author's work. These concepts are intrinsically connected to contemporary China's censorship mechanisms but while it is possible to publish a censored text in China, the banning of a novel, or indeed its author, exists as a final solution for the Chinese government's monopoly over information it deems appropriate for public consumption.

As writers whose work crosses the boundaries of what is considered suitable for public consumption in China, Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke each exhibit a different relationship with the Chinese government's censorship apparatus. As such, for the purposes of this study, each author can be categorised as follows: (1) work and individual banned from mainland China (Ma Jian); (2) work censored and sometimes banned in mainland China (Yan Lianke), and (3) work published in the context of censorship in mainland China, which may have been censored and/or has been written in a way which the author is aware of censorship (Mo Yan). This categorisation is important to make at the beginning of this thesis in order to understand how contemporary censorship in China applies to each author's work and the consequences this has on their individual authorship.

A further distinction which is important to highlight at the outset of this study is the significance of banning fictional works in contemporary China. In opposition to the ongoing implications of censorship, which exist as a continuous context under which contemporary Chinese writers must navigate their writing, the banning of literary texts manifests itself as a singular indication of when a fictional work crosses the boundary of what the Chinese government's censorship apparatus considers suitable for public dissemination.

In an article for the *New York Times* in 2019, Li Yuan shows how China's censorship apparatus is growing into a lucrative industry with what Li describes as 'censorship factories' which take on the censorship burden of other companies in high-tech industries. The article's exposé of this new form of cyber censorship illustrates the contradiction highlighted by Roberts as Li illustrates how new employees (who are almost all college graduates in their 20s) are inducted with 'weeklong "theory" training, during which senior employees teach them the sensitive information that they didn't know before'. Such topics include online references made to past Chinese leaders and emperors; the late Nobel laureate, Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (1955-2017); George Orwell's *1984*, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Significantly, Li's article shows how this process requires human intervention, as opposed to being processed by purely text or visual algorithms, as a result of China's internet users using evasive means to discuss sensitive topics; photos of an empty chair, for example, have thus come to symbolise Liu Xiaobo, who was banned from leaving China to attend the Nobel award ceremony and was, instead, represented by an empty chair.

The continued need for human intervention in contemporary China's censorship apparatus perhaps suggests an intrinsic flaw in its overall design insofar as individuals may be able to bypass literally sensitive topics by replacing them with their symbolic equivalents. Margaret Hillenbrand's recent, ground-breaking study, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (2020) illustrates how censorship and art interplay in

both virtual and ‘real’ spaces and proposes a similar theoretical framework in the field of visual culture but no full-length appreciation of the interplay between contemporary censorship in China and literary fiction exists, until now.

This thesis responds to Lovell’s (2012) grouping of these three authors’ preoccupation with Chinese politics and, by comparing three authors whose work has been varyingly received by the Chinese government, shows how their fiction may ascribe ways in which literature can function as a space in which ‘sensitive topics’ are brought into the sphere of public consumption within the context of censorship in contemporary China. Whilst this study is primarily concerned with how Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’s fiction functions in the context of the Chinese government’s censorship apparatus, it also argues that the 1989 Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement acted as a turning point for how contemporary Chinese writers attempted to reconcile the legacy of an event which ‘irrevocably intertwined’ (Kong, 2012, p. 2) Chinese politics and literature.

In the context of censorship in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, a clear parallel occurs between conflicting narratives of history in China: the ‘official’ narrative, or the narrative of the CPC, and the ‘unofficial’ narrative, accumulated from external sources and accounts contrary to the government’s ‘official’ conclusions of history, which to date defines the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement as ‘a shocking counter-revolutionary riot’ (Zhou, 1996, p. 222). In order to conceptualise the implications of these alternate narratives of history for writers of the post-Tiananmen period, I draw from two frameworks which can be used to understand the implications of censorship in relation to Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’s works in this thesis.

The first of these frameworks is drawn from Cao Qing whose book, *China Under Western Gaze* (2014), presents a critical analysis of the images of China portrayed in British television documentaries between 1980 and 2000. Employing the use of an analytical

framework based on Vladimir Propp's character theory and narrative structure, Cao illustrates how different images of China are constructed through Western televisual narrative strategies and this helped to underpin major Western discourses about China during one of the most singularly iconic moments of modern Chinese history.

Cao's idea develops Propp's theory and argues that his framework of character theory and narrative structure holds particular significance to the period of reform initiated under Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s. For Cao, 'the 1989 events and [issues] of economic vs. political reform' (2014, p.130) provide the basis upon which two binary narratives of the antagonistic relationship between Deng Xiaoping and the Tiananmen students were played out in televised representations of the student protests in Beijing. Using Propp's character and narrative theory, Cao argues that Deng Xiaoping assumes the role of the typological 'villain' character type (as identified by Propp) with the students thus representing the 'heroes' (p.133). In Cao's analysis, he identifies seventeen narratemes, of which: 'Hero'; 'Magical agent'; 'Villain'; 'Struggle', and 'Defeat', can be employed to inform our understanding of referents to the 1989 Tiananmen protests. These narratemes also relate directly to the works of the three authors explored in this thesis' subsequent chapters: most notably in the employment of 'Magical agents' in Mo Yan's *Life and Death* and Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, as well as narratemes correlating the respective narrator-protagonists of these texts' to the other functional elements identified above, such as identifiable 'villains' and narrative 'struggle'.

In terms of the events which occurred in Tiananmen Square, the narratemes identified by Cao construct a terminology in which we are predisposed to sympathizing with a chronological narrative and one in which the hero-students' struggle is ultimately thwarted at the hands of the 'villain'. This reading suggests that the failure of the students' pro-democracy protests is more closely aligned to sympathetic terminologies of June Fourth, such as 'the Tiananmen Square Massacre', or the 'Tiananmen ... tragedy' (Lim, 2014, p. 6) which

encompasses the narrative chronology, suggested by Cao, in which the suppression of the 1989 demonstrations ‘represents the failure of the [students’] *struggle*’ (p. 132, emphasis added).

The Chinese government rejects this terminology, instead preferring to use its own language in reference to the massacre. On rare occasions when the CPC need to use a date for the event, they refer to the Tiananmen Square protests as the ‘June 4 Incident’ (Goldkorn, 2019), the connotations of which are closely associated with the Chinese idiom, ‘What historians need to do is precisely restore the original appearance of historical incidents’ (Jian, Kubler and Zhang, 2013, under ‘226. 【本来面目】 (本来面目) běn lái miàn mù’).

Two further notable instances of the CPC’s direct reference to the Tiananmen Square protests occur in the contemporaneous editorial published in *People’s Daily* on April 26, 1989 and the CPC’s Minister of National Defence and State Councilor, Wei Fenghe’s reference to the demonstrations on the thirtieth anniversary of June Fourth in 2019. Focusing on the students, the *People’s Daily* editorial of 26 April effectively defined the student movement as an ‘abnormal phenomena’ following the death of Hu Yaobang on 15 April 1989.²

Evaluating the sequence of events leading up to the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in the context of its tenth anniversary in 1999, Timothy Brook (1992, pp. 26-27) suggests that public mourning of Hu Yaobang in Beijing, centred on the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square, became a public conduit for anger against perceived nepotism within the CPC. This earlier protest, Brook argues, eventually escalated into the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. A contemporaneous rebuttal to the *People’s Daily*

² Originally published in *Renmin Ribao* (*People’s Daily*) editorial of April 26, 1989. Available at: <http://tsquare.tv/chronology/April26ed.html> (Accessed: 23 May 2020).

editorial was published by Wang Ruowang in May 1989. Wang's (1990, pp. 210-211) argument focuses on the rhetoric of the editorial's accusation toward 'an extremely small number of people with ulterior motives' and suggests that the conveniently ambiguous phraseology of the *People's Daily* piece effectively permitted the CPC to target virtually anyone for potential persecution.³ Wang's critique of the editorial recognises it as an attempt to reaffirm the authority of the CPC in the context of growing tension between the student protesters and party leadership. Conversely, by threatening the students, the editorial itself counterproductively provoked tension, effectively heightening the disturbances and escalation of anti-party sentiment that it had hoped to curtail (Wang, 1990, p. 216).

In the years following the *People's Daily* editorial, it is rare for Chinese officials to publicly acknowledge the Tiananmen protests, having relegated it to 'the dustbin of history' in the CPC's official conclusion of the events (Safire, 1983, p. 14). When asked about the Tiananmen Square protests at a daily news briefing with reporters on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of June Fourth, Hong Lei, China's spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reportedly made it clear that, at least within China, no more discussion of the event is needed, stating that: 'The Chinese government long ago reached a conclusion about the political turmoil at the end of the 1980s' (quoted in Blanchard, 2014). A recent reference to the Tiananmen Square crackdown was made by China's defence minister Wei Fenghe in response to a question posed following his speech at the 18th Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore on 2 June 2019, two days prior to the thirtieth anniversary of the crackdown. Wei's reply elicited surprise among reporters when he defended the CPC's decision to quell the protests. Reported in the *Independent*, Wei referred once again to the military crackdown as an 'Incident': 'Do you think the government was wrong with the

³ Wang's rebuttal was originally published in *Pai Hsing* 192 (16 May): 17-19, in Foreign Broadcast Daily Service, *Daily Report*, 19 May 1989, pp. 43-7. It was later reprinted in *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Document*, 1990.

handling of 4 June? There was a conclusion to that incident. The government was decisive in stopping the turbulence' (quoted in Perrone, 2019).

Applying Cao's character and narrative framework to the references to the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, the 'official' term 'Incident' (*shijian*) seems a somewhat reductive conclusion. It not only negates several of Cao's identified narratemes – most notably, 'hero' and 'struggle', but also emphasizes a focus on the narrative of ineffectualness. In other words, 'Incident' negates Cao's chronologic narrative and denies the student's 'struggle' and 'defeat', which is overshadowed by an official account which project that the pro-democracy demonstrations that resulted in military violence are defined as resulting from the dissident actions of 'impressionable students' (Beam, 2009).

Cao's adaptation of Propp's framework is useful in defining the events of June Fourth. Firstly, as a development of Propp's Formalist approach to the study of narrative functions, it provides an appropriate model which can be applied to further discussions of the thesis' primary literary texts in later chapters. Secondly, it highlights the binary differentiation between conflicting 'official' and 'unofficial' terminologies, which attempt to negate the lasting political significance of the 1989 events vis-à-vis the staging of pro-democracy demonstrations within the CPC's interpretation of these events, which places the chronological narrative described by Cao as one in which, under the CPC's leadership, 'democracy and human rights' in China 'are still but an illusion' (Cao, 2014, p.133).

The second theoretical framework which can be used to contextualise the works discussed in this thesis is drawn from Louisa Lim's *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (2014). Published in the same year as Cao Qing's *China Under Western Gaze* (2014), Lim's book offers a historical analysis of the Tiananmen Square protests through interviews and on-the-ground analysis and argues that the 'official', state-sponsored

conclusion of the June Fourth crackdown has turned China into what she defines as a nation of state-sponsored amnesia (p. 105).

Lim's book highlights the way in which the CPC's censorship of politically controversial subjects' function in asserting its authority on what it pertains to be the 'correct' course of Chinese history. She recalls 'the rewriting of history books' under the first emperor Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (259 BC-210 BC) who, in order 'to consolidate control over political thought ... decreed the burning of all scholarly books, sparing only the chronicles penned by his own historians' (2014, p 139). Much like the symbolic narrative experienced by Ximen Nao's journey through the Buddhist samsāra in Mo Yan's *Life and Death*, Lim postulates that the dynastic cycle of historical rewriting persists within the CPC, as evidenced by its leadership's ongoing refusal to revise its official verdict of the protests as 'an insidious counterrevolutionary current aimed at subverting the authority of the Party-state' (Misra, 2003, pp. 717-718).

In a move 'to test the limits of Chinese censorship in the Internet Age', Lim attempts in her book to attest her hypothesis of national amnesia by presenting the photo of Tank Man to students from 'four Beijing universities whose students had been instrumental in the 1989 movement: Peking University, Tsinghua University, People's University, and Beijing Normal University' (2014, p. 85). 'Out of 100 students', she identified that only fifteen were able to correctly identify the picture, which elicited a palatable cocktail of confusion, scepticism and, in one encounter, what Lim recounts as an accusation 'against others in a move straight from the playbook of China's propaganda apparatus' (p. 86). Conducting the experiment and the act of showing the image alone, coupled with various reactions from outright shock to vociferous retribution, Lim observes: 'felt like an [ideological] act of heresy' (p. 86). Lim's semi-informal survey reveals not only the success to which the CPC and its censorship

strong-arm, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), have hermetically asserted their hold over the press control and censorship of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, but also the extent to which the CPC has achieved a monopoly on China's 'official' historical narrative.

Whilst censorship, artistic suppression and control might mitigate the distribution of politically sensitive topics within China, it remains true that these discourses – as well as the dissemination of Chinese literature, more generally – are not solely restricted to national political censorship but are also disseminated within a wider global context. The ubiquity of the globalised Internet, in particular, presents a continuous challenge to the ability of the CPC (in either resources or deliberate intent) to sustain a monolithic system of censorship, and its ability to sustain its foothold over subversive content in an age of relative digital anonymity for individuals, whether they consider themselves politically active dissidents or otherwise.

The rise of the global Internet from the early 1990s has increasingly challenged the Chinese government's ability to maintain its strict censorship of June Fourth, 1989. In recent years, the ubiquity of the Internet in China, and the ability of an increasingly 'confident' Millennial Generation 'whose childhoods were defined by the crackdown after Tiananmen' (Ash, 2016) has continued to challenge the Chinese government's predilection for suppression by means of censorship by subverting and, in some instances, openly mocking the government's attempts to subvert the historiographic rewriting of the Tiananmen crackdown.

The operations of the Chinese government's censorship apparatus were particularly evident on the twenty-fourth anniversary of the crackdown of the student protests in Beijing. In an article for the *New York Times* in 2013, Didi Kristen Tatlow reports that the synchronistic remembrance demonstrations witnessed in Hong Kong in memory of Tiananmen and the Chinese government's censorship of the words 'Big Yellow Duck',

demonstrate not only a renewed invigoration of political awareness amongst Post-Millennials, but also highlighted the CPC's difficulty in maintaining its monopoly on China's 'official' historical narrative.

These instances of continued censorship relating to June Fourth continue as both a referent and critique for Western press derision on the reportage of contemporary politics in China. In *China's Thought Management*, Anne-Marie Brady (2012, p. 18) makes the case that:

The image of 'Tank man' [is] shown repeatedly in Western media and is constantly referred to in Western-led debate on China as both a symbol of modern China and of the battle of the individual against authoritarianism. Yet, as we have seen in Lim's experiment amongst Beijing's aspiring intellectuals, in China, 'Tank Man' remains virtually unknown.

Headlines claiming that 'China's facing its worst crisis since Tiananmen Square' (Adelman, 2016), 'China's biggest political challenge since Tiananmen in 1989' (Rachman, 2014) and 'Hong Kong protests: Echoes of Tiananmen' ('Hong Kong', 2014) each simplify and neglect the complex social, political and cultural narrative of China's history and its subsequently turbulent ascent into the twenty-first century. And, as Wu Hung emphasises in his book, *Remaking Tiananmen: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (2005), the June Fourth Movement is history, and, as history, it has been transformed into words – chronicles, memoirs, analyses – and images (p. 15).

The experience of 1989 is also indicative of what Timothy Cheek (2015, p. 22) recognises as the 'end of innocence for yet another generation of China scholars in the West who had projected too many hopes onto China' whereby the military crackdown of June Fourth 1989 reasserted and consolidated the CPC's dominance over its own political

narrative internationally, alongside the continued disaggregation of China's 'politically active intellectuals' (McDougall, 1984, p. 271).

Ironically, as Lim (2018) argues in her op-ed in *The Conversation*: 'the harder the Communist Party works to erase the memory of June 4, the deeper its obsession with Tiananmen's legacy becomes'. This sentiment is echoed by the Canadian author Madelene Thein who, while writing her novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), made the observation that: 'no one remembers the Tiananmen massacre more faithfully, or with greater attentiveness, than the Chinese government' (Thein, 2017). Lim's thesis draws upon and expands our understanding of the theories of memory, 'national amnesia' or, what Hildebrandt-Wypych (2017, p. 105) terms 'the politics of forgetting' and provides a useful theoretical framework in which to position Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's fiction within the context of Chinese censorship. In the context of 'national amnesia', the politically sensitive aspects of their collective works pose a challenge to the 'official' narrative and rewriting of significant historical events ascribed by the CPC.

Multiple questions, however, remain. How can Chinese writers respond to censorship by the CPC, and in what ways can writers create a method of reflecting, and subsequently challenging, the authoritarian politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC)? In an increasing era of political suppression within mainland China, how do writers of the post-Tiananmen period effectively reflect upon and represent within their work a history that has been officially erased?

Life-writing as History

This thesis connects Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, three contemporary Chinese writers who are arguably at the peaks of their respective literary careers, but whose work has yet to

be collectively analysed in the literature to date. The central method I employ in this thesis is textual analysis, looking also (following Julia Sonnevend) at the ways in which that text interacts with culture (2016, p.156). In this thesis, I have therefore tried to situate the analysed representations of history in Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's novels within their larger social, cultural and political context(s).

In order to provide a perspective from the authors themselves in my analysis, I examine what Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke have said about their work in news articles, interviews, and the paratextual material contained within their publications which are analysed alongside this study's primary sources. Chapter Four's discussion of Yan Lianke's recent novels, for instance, analyses his use of prefaces and postfaces, zones within published work that Gérard Genette (1997, pp. 1-2) describes as 'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text'. Genette's metaphor of the paratext as a "fringe", or threshold, of an author's work is particularly fitting in the context of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, whose individual works attract polarising responses from critics at home and abroad.

As writers who challenge the boundaries between literature and history in contemporary Chinese literature, the selection of these three authors as the focus of this study embodies the different approaches to writing within a censored state in which the events of the past are highly politicised. In the following chapters, I analyse each author in turn, exploring reflections of modern Chinese history within their seminal works, which are presented alongside consideration of each respective author's position within the contemporary Chinese literary canon.

Alongside their works' collective focus on the significant historical events of China's twentieth century, Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke are uniquely connected by their own lived experience of these events, each having been born within five years of one another in

the decade prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The recollections of their own experiences of China's modern history, as well as how these experiences have been symbolically transformed into their literary works, is key to understanding what their fiction says about China's historical narrative from their current experience of China in the twenty-first century.

Within literary studies, as Julia Novak (2017, p. 1) points out, the proliferation of public interest in accounts of historical lives in recent decades is reflected in the expanding field of life-writing studies. The term 'life-writing' itself has emerged to reflect the diverse work conducted in the field, as scholars regularly reconceptualise their object of study to keep pace with the rapid evolution of life-writing forms and to incorporate the new insights their discipline has yielded. In his introduction to *On Life-Writing*, Zachary Leader (2015, p. 1) suggests that these forms of writing can encompass almost every piece of writing outwith an author's fictional work. Leader thus defines the study of 'life-writing' as encompassing:

a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or part of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings, ... marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms.

This thesis engages with the work of three contemporary Chinese writers whose works are intrinsically connected by their fixation on politics and who themselves are uniquely connected by their experience of living through these key events of Chinese modern history. While the literary representations of significant historical events in their fiction are at the core of this study, the significance of Mo Yan's, Ma Jian's and Yan Lianke's commentary about their lived experience, serves as an important reminder that their careers are not yet

conclusive and, thus, consideration should be taken to incorporate an awareness of their own life-experience in critical evaluations of their work.

This thesis's approach to life-writing is not able to conclusively reflect the multitude of writings, as defined by Leader, by each of its chosen authors. Such a study would demand further consideration beyond the scope of this thesis to fully collate and examine the writings by three authors who are still actively engaged in writing and publishing in contemporary literature. Nevertheless, the forms of writing identified by Leader are reflected amongst the three authors' works discussed throughout this thesis and their relationships to significant historical events are worth recognising, particularly within a context in which highly politicised writings are censored.

Considering theoretical approaches towards life writing in China, Shao (2013) suggests that theoretical debates around life-writing are a comparatively more recent phenomenon in China than more established Western approaches. 'Despite the fact that post-1949 Chinese life writing is voluminous, it has rarely been explored theoretically. At present, autobiography studies in China are still in their infancy. However, in recent years, some theorists have begun to show concern about this shortcoming and are establishing associations to pursue such studies' (Shao, 2013, p. 211). Swindells (1995) offers an earlier theoretical foundation for life writing upon which to contextualise Shao's claim that autobiography studies in China may still be in their infancy. Describing the genre of autobiography within the field of life writing studies, Swindells reflects that, within the context of 'systematic repression', certain life experiences have not been able to be recorded. As a result, Swindells suggests, 'autobiography can appear the most direct and accessible way of countering silence and misrepresentation' (1995, p. 7). Swindells theory acts as a fitting basis for Shao's claim that autobiography studies in China are of growing interest to life writing studies. The systematic censorship apparatus of the CPC and increasingly

repressive mechanisations of the Chinese government have challenged writers' ability to represent their lived experience. Further analysis of autobiographical works from the critical perspective of life writing studies may help to shed light on how writers navigate the CPC's censorship apparatus.

The timeframe of these recent debates similarly correlates with Dryburgh and Dauncey's (2013) exploration of Chinese life writing in their book *Writing Lives in China, 1600-2010*. Shao (2013) suggests that a wealth of Chinese life writing exists is evident after 1949 but has received little theoretical attention. In response to this, Dryburgh and Dauncey's study critically analyses Chinese life writing, tracing its expansion over the past two decades, and argues for the growth of Chinese life writing studies with the publication of specialised monographs and essay collections and a growing body of translations of Chinese life writing works (2013, p. 21).

One such translation, which coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests, was the publication of Liao Yiwu's 廖亦武 (b. 1958) memoir *Bullets and Opium: Real-life Stories of China After the Tiananmen Square Massacre* (2019; translated by David Cowhig, Jessie Cowhig, and Ross Perlin). Liao's memoir tells, for the first time, the stories of Tiananmen protesters sentenced to indeterminate jail terms for "rioting". Critically, Liao describes within this new memoir his own plight of books he lost after the crackdown, including his original manuscript of *My Witness* (2011) and a rewritten manuscript of *My Witness*, including more than forty chapters of an unpublished second volume.⁴ For Liao, the act of writing and remembrance has become a political act shaped by the repressive criminalisation of any account which challenges the CPC's official narrative. In *Bullets and Opium*, he observes that:

⁴ *My Witness* describes the experiences of Liao and other political prisoners in a Chongqing prison who were arrested after the 4 June 1989 crackdown. The book, along with *Interviews with the Lower Strata of Chinese Society* was banned by the CPC Propaganda Department and the PRC Government's Publications Office.

In a country where thought can be criminalized, writing itself creates criminal evidence when a writer... tries to express social realities. ... I have already written several million words of criminal evidence, which several generations of Sichuan police and studied and read. (2019, pp. 228-229)

Two further examples of where Dryburgh and Dauncey's claim that Chinese life writing studies is growing can be found in the publication of Yan Lianke's memoir, *Three Brothers: Memories of My Family* (2020), translated by Carlos Rojas, in which Yan recounts his childhood in rural Henan Province upon the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. The English-language publication of Yan's memoir in March 2020 was followed swiftly by a call for papers in April 2020 which sought contributions to an edited volume focusing on Yan Lianke, seemingly indicating a parallel critical interest in Yan Lianke's life and writing. The proposed volume, edited by Riccardo Moratto and Howard Y. F. Choy, specifically sought contributions on 'biographical aspects' of Yan Lianke's writing style and narrative discourse. The fourth chapter of this thesis, which focuses primarily on the paratextual constructs of Yan Lianke's fiction will be published in the volume, alongside contributions by Andrea Riemenschneider, Shelly W. Chan, Sebastian Veg and Yan Lianke who will contribute a preface specifically for the publication. The volume, which will be published by Routledge as a Companion, marks the first English academic volume on Yan Lianke and represents a landmark opportunity to show how his work has been received in and beyond mainland China, whilst continuing the theoretical trend proposed by Dryburgh and Dauncey, insofar as its potential contribution to a growing body of critical work which actively seek to draw out the life writing elements of contemporary Chinese writers.

Whilst it is true that the forms of life writing identified by Leader are evident in the works of the writers discussed in this thesis, such as Yan Lianke's *Three Brothers* (2020), it is also the case that their fiction functions as a reflection of each author's experience of

writing about contemporary China. As this thesis focusses primarily on each author's fictional works, it is worth highlighting the significance which reflections of each author's experience of mainland China play within their fiction. As the following chapters will show for example, Ma Jian's visceral description of the Tiananmen Square protests are closely linked to his own participation in the events of the pro-democracy movement in 1989. Similarly, Mo Yan's reflection of visiting Tiananmen Square in his short novella 'Change (What Was Communism?)' (2012) offers a rare insight into Mo Yan's lived experience of visiting the Square, whilst Yan Lianke's recent authorial preference for inserting himself into his own fiction (by means of a fictional 'Yan Lianke') in *The Explosion Chronicles*, for example, reflects his own experience of self-censorship whilst writing *Lenin's Kisses*.

Aside from analysing Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's fictional works as its primary source material, this thesis takes advantage of the available life writing material from these three contemporary authors. It considers, for example, articles, interviews, published paratextual material (prefaces and afterwords) and my discussion with two of the three authors whose work I present in this thesis, namely: Ma Jian and Yan Lianke. By considering their fiction from the theoretical framework of life writing studies, the analysis which follows of each author's work highlights the ways in which each author approaches their writing in a political environment where the voices of individual writers are censored; or, in the case of Ma Jian, banned completely.

Periodization

The symbolic representation of significant historical events within Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's collective work is deeply informed by their lived experiences of in modern Chinese history. In the discussion of their works in the chapters that follow, I approach these texts

chronologically, giving primacy in particular to the historical context of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The latter, as Goldblatt (1998) and Kong (2012) suggest and that I also emphasise throughout this thesis, was not only a turning point in Chinese modern history but also in contemporary Chinese literature. It is also worth noting that the primary sources analysed in this thesis were published after 1989 and thus may serve to illustrate a more-than-usually critical turn in Chinese literature in the closing decade of the century.

Addressing the significance of the Tiananmen Square massacre as a turning point in modern Chinese history, Howard Goldblatt emphasises the artistic and philosophical rupture created by the Tiananmen crackdown in the introduction to his literary anthology, *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused* (1998), published just short of a decade after June Fourth, 1989. Reflecting on a range of Chinese works published in the decade following the events of June Fourth, 1989, Goldblatt says that the creative direction Chinese writers took in the aftermath of Tiananmen signifies a transitional shift in Chinese artists and intellectuals' critical enquiry. He suggests this shift places greater emphasis on challenging China's underlying social and political mechanisations but also emphasised the importance of individual's experience amidst the collective experience of Chinese society:

As the decade ended, the Tiananmen massacre caused an artistic and philosophical rupture of unprecedented significance, and that has produced a generation of novelists who describe in graphic and revealing prose a place where surface stability uneasily masks a society in turmoil, whose work probes the darker aspects of life and human behaviour. (1998, p. x)

This quotation from Goldblatt's anthology of post-1989 Chinese literature provides a useful framework which informs the periodization and chronology of prose discussed in the following chapters. Emphasising the significance of the Tiananmen Square massacre as an

artistic rupture, it connects Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke as among a generation of Chinese writers whose work seeks to reveal the underlying socio-political environment of contemporary China. Setting their works within significant events in China's modern history allows each author to draw within their fiction the underlying traumas of Chinese history.

In *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, McDougall and Louie (1999) define three timeframes which emphasise the periodization of significant historical events in twentieth-century China. McDougall and Louie identify the periods from 1900-1937, 1938-1965 and 1966-1989 as periods in which the focus of literary production reflectively shifted from 'The Narrative Subject' (1900-1937) to a return to tradition and the '[Search] for Typicality' (1938-1965), towards the 'Reassertion of Modernity' (1966-1989) and, beyond 1989, an exploration for alternative forms of literature following the Tiananmen Square massacre. The literature which I discuss in this thesis emerges between the years 2004 and 2016. In their fiction, Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, Ma Jian engage with and challenge the schools of literary thought that had preceded them. What each of these authors share with their literary forebears of the twentieth century, however, is a focus on what McDougall and Louie call 'the relation between a literary work and the society in which it is produced and consumed' (1999, p. 1).

McDougall and Louie suggest an implicit correlation between 'a literary work' being reflective of Chinese society at any particular period, but in order to recognise the role of a literary work within this context, it is worth reflecting on the major determinants of Chinese society during these times. The structure of this thesis therefore follows the periodization of China's twentieth century and establishes significant historical events as the context within which contemporary Chinese authors reflect upon significant historic events within their fiction.

For example, the Cultural Revolution exists as the historical context within which Yan Lianke explores how art, and literature in particular, can contest the darkest authoritarian mechanisms of the state in *The Four Books* (2011). For Mo Yan, the violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* are told from the viewpoint of Ximen Ox, Ximen Nao's second reincarnation. In his article "Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller", Yuhua Huang (2014) approaches Ximen Ox's journey from the perspective of a cultural and visual context. Describing the Cultural Revolution in China as 'one of the most catastrophic political upheavals of the twentieth century' (p. 107), Huang suggests that a reading of the novel in its historical context gives greater evidence to the novel's fantastical retelling of the Cultural Revolution (p. 108). Finally, the Cultural Revolution is referenced in Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, in conversation between Dai Wei and Doctor Song. During this encounter, Doctor Song literally reflects on the significance of the Cultural Revolution as a predicament to the underlying societal turmoil which led to the novel's primary focus on the Tiananmen Square massacre.

In terms of their historical context, the novels by Mo Yan and Ma Jian which I turn to in the following chapters follow in the sequence of their writing the major historic events of China's twentieth century. Mo Yan's *Life and Death* sets itself upon the context of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-twentieth century and is followed by Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* which reflects upon the Tiananmen Square massacre. With the exception of *The Four Books*, which is set again upon the historical backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, Yan Lianke's *The Explosion Chronicles* and *The Day the Sun Died* (2018a, translated by Carlos Rojas) chronologically reflect the post-reform period in China and thus act as an indication of the routes contemporary Chinese authors might take in representing not just historical events, but the current context of China, within their fiction.

Howard Goldblatt's suggestion that the Tiananmen massacre produced a generation of novelists whose work seeks to draw out the underlying elements of Chinese society thus returns to Lovell's (2012) grouping of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke as authors whose works are united by their obsession with Chinese politics. Furthermore, it also appears to be the case that these three writers are connected by their own experiences of having lived through the major historic events on which their fiction is set. In its discussion of these authors' work, this thesis extends Goldblatt and Lovell's grouping of these authors by reading their fiction in their historical contexts, as laid out by Huang (2014).

The historical chronology of events which are analysed in the novels in this thesis' subsequent chapters not only connects Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's obsession with Chinese politics, but also reflects one of the main aims of this thesis, which is to consider how representations of historical events occur within Chinese literature under a regime which deliberately censors and erases historical narratives which do not ascribe to the Chinese government's 'official' narrative of history. This discussion may also help to understand the importance of the relationship between literature and censorship in China, a context within which the appearances of politically sensitive periods of Chinese history are closely monitored by the CPC censorship apparatus.

Two of the three authors whose work I analyse in this thesis have experienced the explicit banning of their work's (re)telling of modern Chinese history: Yan Lianke, for his novel *Lenin's Kisses*' portrayal of the Cultural Revolution, and Ma Jian, whose indefinite banning from mainland China was imposed following the publication of his first book, *Stick Out Your Tongue* (1988, translated by Flora Drew). Inspired by and written after his travels in Tibet, *Stick Out Your Tongue* caught the attention of China's censors and all copies were ordered to be destroyed. Since 1988, none of Ma's books have been allowed to be published

in China and Ma himself has been banned from entering the mainland since 2011 (Branigan, 2011; Gunia, 2019).

Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's experience of the CPC's censorship apparatus, of course, raises the question of how Mo Yan has managed to slip by the censors with relative ease, since his works are also largely set in politically sensitive periods of Chinese history. In a review of *Frog* (2009; English translation by Howard Goldblatt, 2015), the latest novel by Mo to be translated into English, Silverman (2015) suggests that Mo's 'sweeping and savage deconstruction' of China's one-child policy, along with the institutional misogyny of measures that preceded it, demands that his literature be read alongside China's most famous dissidents for its critique of the CPC's family planning program. 'Perhaps', as Silverman suggests, 'the Chinese censors were too taken with the power of his storytelling to realize how subversive this novel is'. In a contrasting review of *Frog* for *The New York Times*, Julia Lovell (2015), who has previously connected the political elements of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's work, contrasts Mo Yan's novel with Ma Jian's *The Dark Road* (2012), a similarly critical novel about China's one-child policy. Where Silverman praises Mo Yan's storytelling ability, Lovell unfavourably contrasts *Frog*'s 'language of excess, ... graphic descriptions of gore' and its 'facetious in-jokes about famous foreign writers' to *The Dark Road* and Ma Jian's 'spare, matter-of-fact tone that projects a relentlessly desolate view of China' (p. 8). While Lovell similarly differs from Silverman in her view of *Frog*'s 'historical soft focus', her comparison of the two author's descriptions of the one-child policy,⁵ a state initiative which rendered the individual incapable of making independent judgements about

⁵ The one-child policy was a program in China that was implemented nationwide by the Chinese government in 1980 in order to limit most Chinese families to one child each. The policy was enacted to address the growth rate of the country's population ahead of the CPC Central Committee's decision to relax the policy in November 2013. Assessing the impact of the one-child policy, Hong Fincher's ground-breaking feminist study, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (2018), argues that relaxation of the one-child policy initiated a propagandistic-turn 'in Chinese state media whereby, after more than three decades of forcing women to have abortions, Chinese state media suddenly ... started churning out slogans, articles, and images about the glories of having two children—preferably as soon as possible' (p. 174).

social behaviour, suggests that while Mo Yan's style is more lenient than Ma Jian, 'if the vice chairman of the official writers' association takes such a dark view of its impact, then the reality must be utterly harrowing'.

Where Mo Yan's detractors argue that his position as China's Nobel Laureate for Literature has made him a less likely target for the censors, this thesis reads his work within its historical context and argues that his focus on significant historical events in modern Chinese history places him alongside Ma Jian and Yan Lianke within the generation of contemporary Chinese writers whose work seeks to understand the underlying socio-political environment of Chinese experience.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into five chapters. This first chapter provides an introduction to the thesis and its main aims and concerns. It also places this study's analysis of its three main authors and their respective works within the context of censorship in China, as well as how its authors primary texts relate to issues of life writing and periodization.

Chapter Two focuses on Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as it relates to the political censorship of significant historical events in China. My reading of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* suggests that the novel's symbolic allusions to the Cultural Revolution are at odds with Mo Yan's reception as an author who is frequently decried by his critics as being 'a patsy of the [CPC] régime' (quoted in Daley, 2012). In the context of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, Chapter Three follows from the introduction's exploration of the relationship between literature and 'censorship': the latter being one of the central ideas in Louisa Lim's (2014) book on the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, as well as in C. T. Hsia's (1971) assessment of literary censorship in China. Here, I

look specifically to the recent fiction of Ma Jian and argue that his fiction offers an alternative interpretation of significant historical events in China. In its analysis of Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, Chapter Three demonstrates how contemporary Chinese novelists might attempt to challenge the political constraints of artistic censorship imposed by the Communist Party of China. By considering the literary representation of significant historic events in Mo Yan's *Life and Death* and Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, as well as considering the similarities and differences between them, Chapters Two and Three seek to illustrate the complex relationship that exists between the writer and the State in China, as well as broader issues concerning literature as the interpreter of history under the mechanisms of censorship.

Chapter Four analyses issues of authorship in Yan Lianke's recent fiction, and the consequent literary reception of his novels: *Lenin's Kisses* (2004), *The Four Books* (2011), *The Explosion Chronicles* (2013), and *The Day the Sun Died* (2015). The chapter argues that Yan Lianke's writing exhibits a new direction in contemporary Chinese literature whereby Chinese writers may be able to manipulate the constructs of metafiction and authorship and employ them as a means to circumvent the ideological guidelines for literature and mechanisms of literary censorship. In Chapter Four, I consider the visions of utopian literature evident in the early canon of Chinese literature, the politicization of dreams in Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' rhetoric, and in what sense Yan Lianke's fiction establishes a new school of 'writing' resistance for Chinese authors in contemporary China. Through an investigation of the ruptures in the paratextual construction of his fictional works, the chapter shows how Yan Lianke creates spaces of resistance within his fiction from which writers may be able to establish a space within literature to effectively bypass state censorship.

The conclusion to this thesis draws together findings from the three main chapters for an overall discussion of how the representation of significant historic events are deeply at

work in Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's work, and offers an overview of the ideas presented in the thesis.

My thesis aims to answer four main questions, three of which contain several sub-questions, as follows:

- How is history symbolically represented in contemporary Chinese fiction, in the post-1989 period, in the fictional works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke? A subsidiary question is: what do their texts suggest about the implications of writing about history in China after 1989?
- How do these authors engage with the wider socio-political circumstances of each work's respective context in regard to writing about history within the context of the Communist Party of China's censorship of literary works?
- What role does the public identity of the writer play, and what does their inclusion, or lack thereof, within the canon of contemporary Chinese literature suggest about the relationship between state censorship and literature in China?
- How have Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke been depicted in contemporary reportage (in print media) and how has this affected the reception of their works among readers and academics (and fellow writers)? A subsidiary question is: what is their response to reaction to their own works?

This thesis examines contemporary Chinese fiction published by Chinese authors after the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement, emphasising the profound impact the events of June Fourth, 1989, more than any other episode in recent world history, has had in contemporary Chinese literature. It focuses primarily on the works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, writers who, I argue, have used literature as a means by which to negotiate what Louisa Lim terms the 'boundaries of what is considered politically acceptable in China' in

order to circumvent ‘the subtle algebra of self-censorship [which] has steadily diminished free expression both within China’s border and beyond’ (2014, p. ix).

A Note on the Use of Translated Texts

This thesis presents selected works by Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, which are used as case studies of how historical events are represented within contemporary Chinese fiction. Prior to this thesis’ exploration of each author’s works, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that each work is approached by using Chinese literature in translation. This section therefore considers the use of primarily English language sources and the implications which must thus be taken into account when reading and analysing the translated versions of the original texts which are presented in this thesis.

This thesis looks exclusively at English language translations of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’s fiction. Although I group Ma Jian alongside Mo Yan and Yan Lianke as an author whose works are read in translation it is important to clarify that, whilst his novels are written in Chinese, that they are typically translated by Ma Jian’s wife, Flora Drew, and published in their English-language versions first. To date, only a handful of Ma Jian’s novels have been published in their original Chinese versions, with Armitstead (2019) noting, in an interview with the author, that Ma’s novels are unlikely to be read in their original Chinese, because the censorship of his work is so extreme that ‘even Hong Kong publishers are too afraid to bring out the Chinese original’ (Ma Jian, 2018). By contrast, all the English-language publications of Mo Yan and Yan Lianke’s works presented in this thesis are translations of the original Chinese publication (see Table 1).

This study positions itself in response to Lovell’s (2012) suggestion that Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke show a collective preoccupation with Chinese politics within their work.

Yet, there are limitations to the project explored in this thesis. First, the body of work produced by three contemporary authors as prolific as Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, is too broad to be analysed comprehensively, even within the relatively accommodating scope of a PhD thesis and therefore, this thesis cannot cover every single book by each author. Second, my linguistic competence in Chinese is limited, so only the English translations of the originals are focused on in this research. While it would be possible within this context to approach Mo Yan and Yan Lianke's original novels in Chinese, a comparative study of the Chinese language and translated English versions of Ma Jian's novels is constrained for any scholar by (in)accessibility to the original Chinese versions of his works, which are retained by the author.

The scope of this thesis further justifies the necessity of this study's primary focus on the translated versions of the original novels. It is not possible within this study to compare the English language translations with the authors' original novels; however, this limitation could in principle be fruitfully extended by a further study comparing the English language translations with their original counterparts. The potential of this further investigation is that it might usefully shed light on the similarities and differences between the original Chinese versions and their respective translations and, depending on the extent of these differences, could begin a wider dialogue of these authors' works which may also be applicable to other writers and genres in contemporary Chinese literature, more generally.

Neither does this thesis primarily concern itself with whether or not the translated English versions of the texts are considered wholly accurate insofar as retaining the literal meaning of the original Chinese texts. Arguments concerning the topic of literal translation form such a pivotal role in global literary debates that it would be particularly unfruitful for a thesis attempting to draw out the representation of significant historical events within each

author's texts to focus solely on this topic. Instead, I will outline at the offset of this study aspects of these arguments which are applicable to the texts that this thesis will examine.

Overall, the main aim of this thesis is concerned with the literary engagement with these three authors' works and the respective contexts of each text. To this extent, this study responds to Lovell's (2012) grouping of these three authors in order to examine what their works reflect in the context of contemporary China; how their novels function in the context of a country whose 'official' state-sponsored narrative makes room for artistic or literary voices difficult; and how these authors represent and reflect politically sensitive periods of history within the context of the Chinese government's censorship apparatus.

The increased quantity of Chinese literature in translation over the past twenty years has witnessed the rise of a select number of translators who have helped bring Chinese literature from the exclusive pursuit of a largely academic audience to a wider English-language readership. Here, as earlier in this introductory chapter, I highlight the similarities and differences in Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's translated works, and note the respective translators of the case studies presented in this thesis in turn.

Each author presented in this thesis uses the same translator, who translates and often acts in the framing of their translation's introduction as the arbiter of contextualisation for the text's purpose or meaning which may not be clear to readers who, for example, are unfamiliar with the intersecting fields of Chinese history, literature and culture, more generally. For example, with the exception of Ma Jian's collective works discussed in this thesis, each work by Mo Yan and Yan Lianke which is analysed in the chapters that follow contains a paratextual note by the translator in each author's respective work. The exclusion of such pre- or post-text is perhaps unsurprising if we firstly consider Ma Jian's translator and partner, Flora Drew, who has exclusively translated all of Ma's novels into English after first meeting

and interviewing the author in Hong Kong on the eve of the Handover in 1997 (Armitstead, 2019).

In an interview in the *Guardian*, following the publication of *China Dream* (2018, translated by Flora Drew), a satirical novel which charts the mental breakdown of a corrupt local government official, Ma Jian and his translator Flora Drew discuss their collaboration in detail, providing an insight into Drew's translation practice. Addressing the distinction between her professional capacity as Ma's translator and her personal relationship with the author, Drew suggests that this dynamic allows her 'in some strange way [to] become him, and write the translation not as a friend or a translator, but as [if] Ma would if he were writing the book in English'.

Drew's observation here raises an important point about the act of translation, as well as a more general question which seeks to discover what it is that we, as readers, look for when we read translated versions of the original text. For the translator, is it incumbent to produce translations which are literal, word-for-word versions of the originals? Or is parity of understanding more significant in its attempt to make meaning, both of the author's original text and for the reader's understanding of literary constructs such as 'images' and 'metaphors'?

Of the three authors whose works I present in this thesis, only one translator fleetingly reflects on the practice of literal translation, a kind of translation which, in its extreme version, the target text is translated word-for-word and, even in its weaker form, sticks closely to the source text's lexis and syntax (House, 2018, p. 183; Munday, 2016, p. 73). In his 'Translator's Note' to Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died*, Carlos Rojas (2018) provides a contextual introduction to the novel, in which – as Chapter Four analyses in greater detail – he speculatively correlates the chaos and darkness of the villagers of Goatian's mass

‘somnambulism’ to Xi Jinping’s call for the ‘great revival of the Chinese nation’ (Osnos, 2013) by means of his signature ‘Chinese Dream’ slogan, in 2013.

Outlining the rationale behind his translation of the word ‘dreamwalking’, Rojas notes that *The Day the Sun Died* ‘describes a night during which most of the residents of [Li Niannian]’s village suddenly start sleepwalking—or, to translate the Chinese term for somnambulism 梦游 (*mengyou*) more literally, “dreamwalking”’ (2018, p. iii). Ostensibly, the term ‘dreamwalking’, in English, can be rendered interchangeably as ‘somnambulism’ and ‘sleepwalking’, with the former acting as a synonym of the latter. As synonyms, it is questionable as to the extent to which the rendering of ‘dreamwalking’ (as either ‘somnambulism’ or ‘sleepwalking’) would impact a primarily English-speaking readership. However, in *Rixi* (the original Chinese version of *The Day the Sun Died*) the distinction between these terms is made somewhat more explicit. In Chinese, the root of the word ‘somnambulation’ is *mengyou*, for which the two characters *meng* 梦 (dream) and *you* 游 (swim), are combined and used together to indicate, in both Chinese and English, what is understood as ‘sleepwalking’. Throughout the original Chinese version of the novel, Yan renders what Rojas translates as ‘dreamwalking’, as *mengyou zheng* (for which the character *zheng* 症 is added). The addition of *zheng* here is significant as it is used to allude, in medical practice, to a syndrome. For Liu (2019, p. 250), *zheng*, in modern Chinese usage, refers to ‘the symptoms of a disease’ and, importantly in modern Chinese language, 症 (*zheng*) is a character which did not exist prior to the PRC’s standardisation of traditional Chinese characters in the mid-twentieth century.

The digitisation of source material allows for cross-examination of terms used throughout a given text. Employing a simple digital cross-reference of the terms ‘somnambulism’, ‘dreamwalking’, and ‘sleepwalking’ throughout Rojas’ translation of *Rixi* reveals that ‘dreamwalking’ appears most frequently with 419 results, with ‘somnambulism’

– Yan’s original term of reference – appearing 66 times throughout the text. The third referent, ‘sleepwalking’, by comparison, appears only twice throughout the entire English-language translation, each time within the context of the novel’s narrator Li Niannian’s observations of the village residents.

The distinction between ‘somnambulation’ and ‘dreamwalking’ here is a minor one within the body of an entire translated work of fiction and is one which may not be immediately apparent or, indeed, arguably important, for the general reader of Yan’s work. Nevertheless, Rojas’ justification of this particular translation is notable, particularly given his role as Yan Lianke’s go-to translator, and when analysed in the context of highly politicised contemporary Chinese literature. My analysis in Chapter Four of *The Day the Sun Died*, for example, illustrates the politicisation of the novel in its image of Gaotian’s mass ‘dreamwalking’ in Rojas’ English translation. This reading of the novel, which correlates Gaotian village’s mass ‘dreamwalking’ with Xi Jinping’s China Dream policy and suggests that the escalating chaos which Gaotian’s residents experience is a metaphor for the Chinese government’s pursuit of the China Dream. However, as the fourth chapter shows, this reading of the novel is at odds with the author, and an interpretation which Yan has contested in interviews since its English-language publication in 2018. The implication of Rojas’ translation practice in the example returns us once more to the question raised earlier by Flora Drew’s translation of Ma Jian’s work, whereby an implicit implication of the act of translation seemingly lies in balancing the literal reproduction of the original text whilst also authentically reflecting the author’s intended meaning.

In this section’s discussion of Flora Drew’s and Carlos Rojas’ translation practices, I have attempted to highlight how translation practice has supported the recent dissemination of Chinese literary fiction, as well as introducing some of the issues which arise as a consequence of translating novels which focus on politically sensitive periods of modern

Chinese history. The third translator relevant to this thesis' primary texts is Howard Goldblatt.

Much like Drew and Rojas, Goldblatt acts as Mo Yan's translator and has, by the author's own admission, been Mo's 'voice' in English since the English-language translation of *Red Sorghum* in 1993. Writing in *Chinese Literature Today*, Goldblatt describes his relationship with Mo Yan and how their collaboration has developed over the decades since the publication of *Red Sorghum*. Goldblatt (2013, p. 9) explains that Mo gives him much freedom as a translator, on one occasion saying: 'Do what you want. I can't read what you've written. It's your book'. This comment resonates with the response another of the authors, Yan Lianke, gave to an audience question which I witnessed at the Edinburgh International Book festival following the publication of *The Day the Sun Died* in 2018. Asked how he felt about translation and what is lost or gained in translations of his work, Yan replied: 'I can't speak a word of English so truthfully I don't care whether it's translated well or not, as long as it's written well' (Yan Lianke, 2018b).

From Mo and Yan's comments, the issue of translation seems to be less of concern than the authorship of their work. For Mo Yan, the idea of the book's authorship is transferred to Goldblatt, whereas Yan's primary concern is whether or not Rojas is as well written as his source material. The recent timing of this thesis, and the reflections made in Goldblatt's (2013) article and Yan Lianke's response in 2018 show that these debates are active within the field, but a critical evaluation of translation practice, particularly focussing on long-term collaborative partnerships between Chinese authors and English-language translators, has yet to be fully undertaken.

Similarly, to date, Goldblatt has not written any essays or critical reflection of his translation strategies and theory. Nevertheless, his view and style can generally be deduced from interviews, articles and his translation works, such as his self-interview with 'Ge

Haowen' (a Romanized transliteration of 'Howard Goldblatt') in *Chinese Literature Today* (2011). In this self-interview, Goldblatt (as 'Ge Haowen') describes his translation practice as an 'evolutionary process ... to turn a literary text into the best translation possible' (2011, p. 100). Recognising that this practice invariably leads to an interpretive, if relatable, work, Goldblatt nevertheless summarises his translation philosophy by asking: 'Have I given my reader the opportunity to enjoy the work in much the same way as a reader of the original could enjoy it?' (p. 100). Whilst answers to this question may be based on the relative subjectivity of the reader's 'enjoyment' of Goldblatt's translations, Anna Sun (2012) asserts that the English-language translations of Mo Yan's novels 'are in fact superior to the original in their aesthetic unity and sureness'. Critical explorations into Goldblatt's translation practice, such as recent studies by Yim (2016) and Zhang (2020) highlight a long-overdue appraisal of the role which Goldblatt has played in bringing Mo Yan to an English-speaking audience.

For the purposes of this thesis, the primary sources in translation are used to examine their cultural and political contexts, in response to Lovell's (2012) suggestion that their works' collective preoccupation with Chinese politics may provide insight into how contemporary Chinese authors write about politically sensitive periods of Chinese history, taking into account the context of censorship in China.

Further to this, a large amount of scholarship exists on the writings of Mo Yan and Yan Lianke, but few academics studies have focused their attention on the work of Ma Jian. Many studies have pursued historical readings of these authors' individual works, such as Li's (2015) analysis of Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* as illustrative of Mo's use of storytelling as a means by which to explore trauma and memory in Chinese history. But no studies, to date, have analysed the historical elements of their fiction in such terms collectively.

A final consideration worth noting here is the time difference between the publication of an author's original text and the time that is needed for its translation. The table below shows the original publication date of Yan Lianke and Mo Yan's novels and the subsequent publication of their corresponding English translations. It should be noted that Chapter Two's discussion on Mo Yan focuses solely on his novel, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, however, in order to provide a wider scope of the time difference between his work's original publication and Goldblatt's translation, I have included (in the table, below) his most recent novel *Frog* (2009) alongside a selection of his major novels spanning the last three decades. The results in the table below show that Goldblatt's translations of Mo Yan's novels take, on average, seven years and six months to publish, while Rojas' translations of Yan Lianke's original publications take an average of four and a half years to publish into their English-language translations. Once again, Ma Jian stands out with Mo Yan and Yan Lianke as the exception to the rule. His novels of the last thirty years, although originally written in Chinese, have been first published only in their English-language translations. His works are therefore not included in the table below.

Original publication			English publication		
Title	Author	Year	Title	Translator	Year
受活 <i>Shou Huo</i>	Yan Lianke	2004	<i>Lenin's Kisses</i>	Carlos Rojas	2012
四书 <i>Si Shu</i>	Yan Lianke	2011	<i>The Four Books</i>	Carlos Rojas	2015
炸裂志 <i>Zhalie Zhi</i>	Yan Lianke	2013	<i>The Explosion Chronicles</i>	Carlos Rojas	2016
日熄 <i>Rixi</i>	Yan Lianke	2015	<i>The Day the Sun Died</i>	Carlos Rojas	2018
红高粱家族 <i>Hong Gaoliang Jiazu</i>	Mo Yan	1986	<i>Red Sorghum</i>	Howard Goldblatt	1993

酒国 <i>Jiu Guo</i>	Mo Yan	1993	<i>The Republic of Wine: A Novel</i>	Howard Goldblatt	2000
丰乳肥臀 <i>Feng Ru Fei Tun</i>	Mo Yan	2005	<i>Big Breasts & Wide Hips</i>	Howard Goldblatt	2005
檀香刑 <i>Tianxiang Xing</i>	Mo Yan	2001	<i>Sandalwood Death</i>	Howard Goldblatt	2013
生死疲劳 <i>Shengsi Pilao</i>	Mo Yan	2006	<i>Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out</i>	Howard Goldblatt	2012
蛙 <i>Wa</i>	Mo Yan	2009	<i>Frog</i>	Howard Goldblatt	2014

Table 1: Time differential of Chinese-English translation of Yan Lianke' and Mo Yan's major novels

This time differential has particular relevance to this study, which partly seeks to understand how these authors' works engage with the wider socio-political circumstances of each novel's respective context. As Chapter Four's analysis of the English-language translation of Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died* shows, it cannot be assumed that the novel is responding to the contemporary contextual circumstances of its English-language publication, rather, the reader must be cognisant of the circumstances within which the original text was published. Whilst this claim can be made for all translation(s), an awareness of the time differential in the publication of his works' Chinese to English-language translation is particularly specifically relevant for contemporary Chinese authors such as Yan Lianke, whose work often explicitly critiques the immediate political context of China at time of writing. As Table 1 shows, the publication of the English-language versions of the original texts often appears in print several years after the original and therefore care should be taken to place the analysis of translated texts within the context of the original version's time of writing. For the purposes of this study, I have therefore selected the most recent (translated) works of each author, taking into account the original publication in Chinese and its subsequent translation into English.

Before concluding this section, it is worth noting that whilst efforts have been made by a select number of translators to expand the range of Chinese-to-English translations by Chinese authors more generally, the fact remains that very little Chinese literature makes it into English translation.⁶ Chad Post of *Vulture* argues that this issue is not necessarily limited to Chinese-to-English translations but reflects the fact that not many translations make it into English at all (2019). He notes a steady ten percent decline in the number of published translations (into English) since 2016. By contrast, data from *CN* reports that eight-to-nine thousand English titles are translated into Chinese annually: the highest number of published translations per country globally. The reception of Chinese-to-English translations also appears to be somewhat in decline. Of the Chinese-to-English translations published in 2019, only Mike Fu's 2019 posthumous translation of Sanmao's 三毛 (1943-1991) *Stories of the Sahara* (1974) received a review, included in the 'Overlooked' section of the *New York Times* (Ives and Li, 2019). In a 2020 article published by *RADIICChina*, translator Dylan Levi King presents the case that only the genre of Chinese science-fiction has managed to flourish amidst the 'under-read' Chinese books that make it into English translation. One tenet of King's argument is his suggestion that authors like Yan Lianke and Mo Yan, whom he cites as examples, are illustrative of Western audience's appetites for their dissident political stances (or, in the case of Mo Yan, lack thereof) rather than their works' literary merit.

Furthermore, King's conclusion supports the idea that because 'translation is one of the most meaningful areas of cultural exchange', a more drastic overall of Chinese literature in translation is needed. The recentness of King's article suggests that these issues are part of the ongoing debate within the field of Chinese-to-English translation. This thesis acts as a point of connection within this debate insofar as what may also be extended to King's

⁶ In the context of the United States, *Three Percent* found that 'only about 3% of all books published in the United States are works in translation' and, of those, literary fiction and poetry account for only 0.7 percent (*Three Percent*, 2018).

conclusion is an appraisal of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's works on the basis of their literary merit. While it is the case that this study's approach to these authors' works is one which takes into account the political context of censorship, at its heart it is a thesis which considers how these authors navigate the intersections between history and politics within their literary fiction, a critical assessment of which has been overlooked by the differing political stances of each author.

Lovell (2012) is the first to have suggested grouping Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke together, highlighting that an extended appraisal of these authors' fiction as a collective is long overdue, and the following thesis seeks to do this: an exploration of three contemporary Chinese writers who produce novels which provide insight into the intersections between Chinese history and contemporary politics, and whose relevance to understanding the mechanisms of censorship—and even the function of literature itself—under the authoritarian system of governance maintained by the CPC, makes them worthy of further critical study.

A Consideration of Three Key Terms

Before concluding this first chapter, it is useful to consider three of the key terms which will be returned to throughout this thesis, namely 'significant historical events', 'symbolically represented' and 'reflections'.

Significant historical events

This thesis' analysis of the historical fiction of its three key authors invariably touches upon the respective historical events contained within each author's respective works. For

example, Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* opens at the beginning of Mao's Great Leap Forward and proceeds to narrate the last half century of Chinese experience from the perspective of a man executed at the height of the Land Reform Movement. The novel, as Lovell (2012, p. 16) outlines, transitions 'through a checklist of the monumental landmarks of Maoism: Land Reform, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and so on' before concluding at the beginning of the new millennium. Where Mo Yan's *Life and Death* spans the latter half of China's twentieth century, in contrast, Yan Lianke's *Four Books* (2010) and Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* focus on specific events during this period. In *Four Books*, for example, Yan centres his attention on the years of Mao's Great Leap Forward, with the novel's narrative alternating between four different voices within a Labour Reform camp.

Banned in mainland China for its depiction of the Great Leap Forward, Yan Lianke's *Four Books* suggests that some historical events are more significant than others within the CPC's official historical narrative than others. In her *Guardian* review of *The Four Books*, upon its translation into English in 2015 by Carlos Rojas, Isabel Hilton (2015) points towards the novel's visceral exposition of Mao's disastrous industrialisation scheme which set in motion what Hilton describes as 'the catastrophic events that the party created and which it continues to try to scrub from the nation's history'. Yan Lianke's work, as analysed in Chapter Four, exemplifies the way in which contemporary Chinese authors juxtapose the contemporary issues of Chinese experience with significant historical events of China's modern history. As Lovell (2012, p. 19) points out in her article "Finding a Place: Mainland Chinese Fiction in the 2000s", the author's setting of contemporary political or socioeconomic issues upon the backdrop of significant historical events in Chinese modern history provides not only a way for authors such as Yan to narrate some of the most significant taboos of post-1949 history, but also highlights the corrosive effects of Maoist

repression on individuals and the consequences of contemporary China's economic rise on its rural populations.

The *OED* defines the term 'significant' as 'a thing which expresses or conveys meaning; a sign, a symbol, an indication' ("Significant"), while a cross reference search in relation to historic events describes 'significant' in this context as 'the quality of being worthy of attention; importance, consequence' ("Significance"). Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'significant historical events' as a catch-all term used to emphasise the importance of historical events in the works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke. However, the historical events upon which these three authors' works are respectively set also exist as events which have drawn attention to Chinese society and politics over the course of the twentieth century and have subsequently affected the trajectory of China's future, particularly in the context of China's political system.

The latter meaning of 'significant', defined as 'the quality of being worthy of attention; importance, consequence', also aligns with Julia Lovell's notion of the 'consequences' of historical events, and is particularly relevant to this study as in Chapter Three, in which I discuss the idea that Ma's Jian's novel, *Beijing Coma*, focuses on the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations of 1989 in order to illustrate the significance of this event in modern Chinese history. As I discuss in Chapter Three, the significance of June Fourth, 1989 is further complicated by the disparity between the 'official' narrative posited by the Chinese state and narratives outwith which attempt to confront the effective erasure of the June 4 enacted by the Chinese censorship apparatus.

In global history, an imperfect juxtaposition might be made between the events of June Fourth, 1989 in Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall just five months later, heralding the end of the Cold War and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. As Harrison (2019, p. 372) points out, however, the June Fourth demonstrations in Tiananmen

Square share a date with Poland's elections: an event which 'really began the toppling of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe'. A question arises in relation to the significance of these events: if, as Harrison suggests, Poland's elections of June Fourth were more consequential in terms of the toppling of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe, why do we historically associate this more commonly with the fall of the Berlin Wall? As follows, what are the necessary prerequisites for an event to be considered historically 'significant'?

Harrison (2019, p. 327) offers an answer to this question by positing that 'People around the world felt and still feel more emotionally drawn to the fall of the Wall than to the elections in Poland. At a time of increasing reliance on visual media, the visual drama of watching footage of Berliners celebrating on the night of November 9 together with the ongoing availability of 'real' pieces of the Berlin Wall to be purchased as keepsakes no doubt contribute to this. And, sadly, the dramatic, emotional pictures of June 4, 1989 were those of the Chinese crackdown on democracy activists in Tiananmen Square, not the elections in Poland'.

Writing in the *Guardian* to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the protests in 2009, Ma Jian describes how the Chinese Communist Party tolerates no mention of the massacre which 'killed thousands of unarmed citizens, and altered the lives of millions', emphasising that any mention of the Tiananmen Square protests in China is strictly 'taboo'. The resulting 'amnesia to which China has succumbed', Ma suggests 'is not the result of natural memory-loss but of state-enforced erasure'. Nevertheless, Ma Jian suggests that 'Tiananmen Square, and other sites connected with the events of 1989, still remain charged with memory. When the written and spoken word is censored, the urban landscape becomes a nation's only physical link to the past'.

Although I use the term ‘significant’ predominantly in the context of historical events throughout this thesis, it is also a word which can equally be applied to the works of the three authors themselves. The word ‘significant’ appears in reviews of Ma Jian’s works from the beginning of his literary career. In one early *New York Times* review of Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma*, Jess Row describes Ma’s choice of setting the novel upon the Tiananmen Square uprising ‘a very *significant* strategic choice’ (2008, emphasis added), through which Ma presents a day-by-day account of the student movement that led up to the events of June Fourth, 1989. In a preface included in the Chinese version, Ma Jian makes this intention explicit, arguing that it is the Chinese people who are truly comatose: ‘In Dai Wei’, the protagonist and narrator of *Beijing Coma*, Ma writes, ‘there is a strong, resilient person who remembers, and only memory can help people regain the brightness of freedom’ (quoted in Row, 2008). Dai Wei, a former biology student, is shot in the head during the military crackdown, falls into a coma, and for the following decade exists in a comatose state, lying in his mother’s spare apartment. The title conceit, as Lasdun (2008) notes, refers to ‘the systematic erasure of the event from public consciousness as the hardliners in the government consolidated their victory ... Mention of the troops’ massacre of unarmed civilians remains forbidden, as does all reporting that differs in any way from the official version’.

Outlining its use as a key term employed throughout this thesis, I have drawn from two definitions of ‘significant’ which can be used to emphasise the importance of historical event over the course of China’s modern history, as well as extending the term to encompass the significance of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’s works within the context of contemporary China. The metaphor of Dai Wei’s coma in Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma* reflects the underlying trauma of a significant rupture in China’s historical record which has been effectively erased from public discourse and consciousness. In creating a protagonist who is immobile but coruscatingly alert, *Beijing Coma* acts not only as a significant contribution

against the ‘official’ narrative of Chinese history pursued by the CPC but also as a fitting analogy for post-Tiananmen China. As Persky (2011, p. 215) notes of the novel, through Dai Wei’s coma, Ma Jian appears to literally reflect contemporary China’s relationship with history akin to James Joyce’s famous dictum: ‘History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake’.

Persky’s connection between the opening reflection in *Ulysses* (1922) and China’s relationship with history appears once more in Carlos Rojas Translator’s Note to Yan Lianke’s *The Day the Sun Died*. In his preface to Yan Lianke’s novel, Rojas connects Stephen Dedalus’ famous comparison of history to a nightmare to Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 (1881-1936) preface to *A Call to Arms* (written in 1922, the same year as Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but published in 1923). Where Joyce’s narrative follows Stephen Dedalus as he seeks to *awaken from* the nightmare that is history, Lu Xun worries that his work might succeed in rousing his ‘blissfully oblivious readers, causing them to *wake into* a state of historical awareness for which they would then have no easy remedy’ (Rojas, p. iii, emphasis in original).

Symbolically Represented

One of the methods by which the three authors presented in this thesis continue Lu Xun’s theme of waking their readers into ‘a state of historical awareness’ is the way in which their fiction symbolically represents history. After ‘significant historical events’, the most frequently returned-to term in this thesis is ‘symbolically represented’. As Womack (2005, p. 49) outlines, symbols help facilitate a common understanding of the world in which we live and may be used to represent multiple levels of meaning beyond their literal definition. Here, I outline this term’s relevance to the works presented in this study and its use throughout this thesis, more generally.

The primary consideration for interpreting the symbolic representation of objects in the texts within this thesis is this study's focus on contemporary Chinese literature, which partially relies on a different set of symbolic codas than the Western literary canon. An example of this appears in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and is drawn out by Huang (2009, p. 33). During Ximen Nao's third reincarnation as a pig, Ximen reflects upon Mao Zedong who, in the preceding chapter of the novel, has just passed away:

The moon that night had fallen from the sky, but this night it rose out of the river, just as big and round as the other one, red at first, like an innocent child sent to earth from some hidden spot in the universe, bawling and bleeding and turning the water red. ... My moon, solemn and bleak, rose up for Mao Zedong. We saw him sitting on the moon – his bulk pressing down and altering its shape into an oval. He wore a red flag like a cape, held a cigarette in his fingers, and raised his heavy head slightly. A pensive look was frozen on his face (Mo Yan, pp. 339-340).

The 'solemn and bleak' moon, as Huang points out, symbolically represents a reversal of Mao as the crimson son in communist ideology and represents a departure from a socialist past of Mao-Era 'idealism and innocence' towards a new era of postsocialist ideology. Similarly, Mo Yan's repetition and symbolic use of 'red' ('red water', 'red flag', 'red cape'), a colour normatively associated with symbols of Chinese communism, and juxtaposes them against the 'heavy... pensive' figure of Mao Zedong. In the context of *Life and Death's* narrative, Mo Yan employs this symbolic representation of the news of Mao Zedong's death to highlight how Ximen and his characters are thrown literally overnight into a new mode of existence with a different cultural logic: a technique which Huang (2009, p.34) illustrates is also evident in a number of Mo Yan's other works such as in the *Republic of Wine* and in his novella *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (1991).

This passage from *Life and Death*, which recalls Lu Xun's reference to the moon in the opening pages of *Diary of a Madman*, is illustrative of Chan's (2011, under '*Life and Death Are Wearing My Out—A Tragic Playland*') connection between Mo Yan and Lu Xun where she argues that symbolic use of the moon within their texts invites the reader to consider the further meaning beyond the moon's normative connotations. Referring to Mo Yan's cynicism towards history in his sixth novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995), Chan further points out that, in the context of the moon's feminine roots within Chinese language and as a symbol in Chinese culture, the moon is usually considered a positive symbol as opposed to its normative association with aspects of madness in Western cultures.

That the symbolism of the moon is thus connected with the death of Mao Zedong and the dawning of a post-socialist China is suggestive of a more-than critical approach from an author whose work is often overlooked by his political affiliation with the CPC. In the context of censorship, this thesis considers how Mo Yan's fiction navigates the boundaries of politically sensitive periods of modern Chinese history and suggests that it is his literary use of symbolism which enables him to more ably reflect upon significant historical events from within this context.

Huang and Duran's multiauthored volume, *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller* (2014) is the most recent English-language critical study of Mo Yan's works to date, following Shelly. W. Chan's monograph *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan* (2011). *Mo Yan in Context* extends Chan's study by situating its readings of Mo Yan's works in their literary, cultural, and social contexts, as well as within a broader view of reading and studying world literature (Duran and Huang, 2014, p. 7). Debates on the extent to which earlier Chinese writers of the twentieth century, particularly Lu Xun, have influenced Mo Yan's works recur throughout the volume, and Wang (2014, p. 129) makes the observation that Mo Yan appears to have inherited Lu Xun's 'critical spirit'

and that his writing in *Life and Death* extends the idea Lu Xun's critical approach by subjecting Mo Yan's emotions and political concerns to literary considerations. Quoting Mo Yan's acceptance speech from his Nobel Prize win in 2010, Wang highlights how the symbolic transformation of politics through his fiction shows how his writing both originates in, and shows concern for political issues, but how their representation within his fiction allows them to transcend and 'be greater than politics' ("Nobel Lecture"

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/25452-mo-yan-nobel-lecture-2012/>).

In the context of a regime which actively censors historical narratives according to political ideology, the idea that literature can transcend politics acts as a useful framework on which the symbolic representation of significant historical events within the fiction of the three authors analysed in this thesis may be set out. As the subsequent chapters will show, the symbolic representation of political issues—the overarching theme which Lovell (2012) suggests connects Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke—occurs throughout their literary fiction. In the context of analysing Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke as a collective group of contemporary Chinese authors, it is finally worth noting how the selection of these three authors may also serve as an example of 'symbolic representation' itself. This does not suggest that their works are in some way representative of contemporary Chinese writers but instead highlights the idea that the political stance of each author presented within this study represents a different position by which Chinese writers might be able navigate the CPC's censorship apparatus in the exploration of politically sensitive periods of modern Chinese history.

Reflections

Having considered the use of the term ‘symbolically represented’ in the context of this thesis, it is finally worth noting the third term which I return to throughout this study: ‘reflections’. Following my earlier consideration of ‘symbolically represented’, in literary studies, ‘reflections’ refers to the way in which authors consider or write about the past or, as this section will show, how an author’s ‘reflects’ wider issues within their work.

The use of ‘reflections’ as a term in the Chinese literary canon is method by which Chinese writers have expressed their concerns about Chinese society and politics throughout the twentieth century. As a literary trend, Literature of Reflection (*fansi wenxue*) came to prominence during the late 1970s and early 1980s, almost immediately after the Cultural Revolution which, by the official reckoning, ended in late 1976. The trend towards Literature of Reflection gained popularity, in part, as a result of its open criticism of China’s political and social shortcomings and in-depth reflections on the cultural elements behind these problems, often going far beyond the immediate historical circumstances of the time. Akin to the three authors’ work at the forefront of this thesis, fiction was the predominant genre within this literary trend. According to Li Meng and King-fai Tam (2018, p. 1), the trend towards Literature of Reflection was amalgamated with a coexisting literary trend towards Literature of Trauma (*shanghen wenxue*) to form what is referred to as ‘New Era Literature’: a term which has since come to encapsulate broader reference to literature from the late 1970s to the late 1980s and was hailed as ushering in an intellectual movement in the history of twentieth-century China.

The contemporary authors whom I present in this thesis appear largely to follow the trend of their literary predecessors insofar as relating the reflections within their respective works to China’s political and social shortcomings. Reflections on significant historical events, which are considered by the CPC’s official narrative of history to be politically problematic, also align their work with the Literature of Reflection’s focus on looking beyond

the immediate historical circumstances of the time. For example, while Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* predominantly focusses on the Tiananmen Square protests, the novel also reflects on the negative political consequences of the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, Mo Yan's *Life and Death*, which is set across the last fifty years of China's twentieth century, reflects upon the years prior to the Great Leap Forward and integrates references to classical Chinese literary characters to guide the novel's narrator-protagonist through his varying animal reincarnations.

In each of these examples from Mo Yan and Ma Jian's work, the joint themes of death and violence are vividly deployed by each writer in their reflections of historical events, such as in the 'motionless bodies lying on the blood-soaked floor' (2008, p. 580) of Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* and the first 'violent battles' (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 158) between the Red Guards and Northeast Gaomi Township's residents at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.

For Xie Mian (2016, p. 121) the exploration of these aspects of reality within Chinese literature has extended the expressive space of literature, helped to widen people's vision and opened up a new understanding for life and the world. Where prior generations of Chinese writers had endeavoured to portray the progression and happiness of life that Communism brought to Chinese society, there nevertheless existed what Xie describes as: 'a serious lacking of revelation of ugliness'.

This 'lack of revelation' in prior generations of Chinese literature's reflections on society is a concern Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke actively seem to redress within their fiction. Yan Lianke's 2004 novel *The Joy of Living* (also translated as *Lenin's Kisses*), for example, is considered by Leung (2016, p. 268) to be the author's 'grand project' in blending Chinese culture with 'the grotesque'. The novel juxtaposes the abundant descriptions of physically disabled villagers, put on display in a travelling carnival, with the carnival's

audience. *The Joy of Living*'s conclusion serves to illustrate the carnival audience's exploitation and suppression of people with physical disabilities and thus, as Liu (2007, p. 22) describes 'highlights [Yan Lianke's] criticism of social inequity, official corruption, and consumer culture' recalling the 'ugliness' of reality often attributed to critical realism (Gong, 2001, p. 91). The uncovering of the 'ugliness' of society through the lens of violence or, in the case of Yan Lianke's *The Joy of Living*, ideas of the 'grotesque' once again returns to the early modernist writer Lu Xun who endorsed a modern Chinese literature born out of the author's fearless self-reflection and incisive study of reality (Feng, 2004, p. 40). The definition of 'reflection' used thus far to describe how Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke's work reflects upon contemporary China and significant events in Chinese history also extends its definition to aspects of 'self-reflection' evident within their fiction. Connecting with the ideas of life writing outlined earlier in this introductory chapter, Ma Jian's reflections of the Tiananmen Square massacre in *Beijing Coma* are made all the more poignant by the author's own experience of the event itself.

In his article for the *Guardian*, which commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre and also coincided with the tenth anniversary of *Beijing Coma*'s first publication, Ma Jian reflects that the novel was inspired by his brother who, a week after the government declared martial law on the pro-democracy protesters in Beijing, 'sprinted across a road in ... Qingdao, ... and ran into a washing line, fell and cracked his head'. Returning to his hometown of Qingdao from the demonstrations in Beijing, Ma Jian avoided being among 'the many hundreds or thousands who tragically lost their lives' in the early hours of 4 June when armed troops were dispatched to dissipate the unarmed protesters in the Square.

In the aftermath of 4 June, Ma Jian describes his brother during his coma as 'the only free person left in the country. Although his body was inert, his mind was free to travel back in time and reflect on what had happened'. For Ma Jian (2019), his brother's coma acted as a

metaphor for post-Tiananmen China, as well as his inspiration to write *Beijing Coma* in the hope that ‘it might help retrieve Tiananmen from oblivion’. In the context of China’s censorship apparatus, the act of retrieving Tiananmen through the writing of *Beijing Coma* has ensured that the novel, and Ma Jian himself, have been banned in China since the Chinese edition’s publication in Hong Kong in 2009.⁷ Unlike Mo Yan and Yan Lianke who, to date, have not directly written about the June Fourth Massacre, *Beijing Coma* is the first Chinese literary work to confront these events so directly.

That Ma Jian’s work has been the focus of only a limited number of academic studies is striking, and perhaps raises more questions than answers about the success of China’s censorship apparatus in relation to his work. Of those studies that exist, most situate their analysis of *Beijing Coma* specifically within the context of its political dimensions, such as Kong (2012) and Loh (2013) or in relation to theories of ‘biopolitical criticism, narratology ... and spatial theory’, as in Kwa’s (2019) reading of the novel. To date, there exists no critical academic analysis of *Beijing Coma* which considers the novel as a reflection of the events of June Fourth, and which situates it alongside the work of Ma Jian’s contemporaries as representing a critical turning point in Chinese literary fiction in the post-Tiananmen period.

⁷ Written after his exile and translated by Flora Drew, *Beijing Coma* first appeared in English in 2008 and other languages before its Chinese edition came out in Hong Kong and Taiwan in 2009. The novel’s publication was timed to coincide with successive anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square massacre, with the Chinese edition marking the twentieth anniversary of the event.

Chapter Two: Reflections on Significant Historical Events in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

Introduction

This chapter situates its focus on literary representation of significant historical events in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. The chapter reflects upon the primary foundations for mass political and social change in China as the historical context for the novel, primarily considering the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, in the years leading to the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* details the protagonist-narrator's experience of China's revolutionary period. In this chapter, I examine how the novel constructs a view of Chinese historicity as one which intrinsically negotiates the CPC censorship mechanism in its evocation of cyclical narrative and its subtle allusions to historically contentious periods in Chinese history, which juxtaposes the enshrined narrative tautology of the CPC. In this regard, Mo Yan is unique as a contemporary Chinese writer, if we consider Sheldon H.-P. Lu's assertion of the role of 'grand metanarratives' within Chinese narrative tradition in his book *From Historicity to Fictionality* (1994), where he makes this observation:

histories, stories, and fictional works perform two major political functions. To borrow Jean-François Lyotard's terms, the two functional polarities of traditional Chinese narrative are "legitimation" and "delegitimation." At one extreme of the wide spectrum of Chinese narratives, official historiography is the grand master metanarrative that legitimizes itself and the political order. At the other extreme,

“small stories” (*Hsiao-shuo*) are suppressed, marginalized narratives that delegitimize the existing social structure and undermine official discourse. (p. 161)

Similarly, the chapter considers Mo Yan’s reputation as one of ‘the most prolific writer[s] in present-day China ... whose literary productions have enjoyed an enormous readership and have captured a great deal of critical attention’ (Chan, 2011, p. 3). Mo Yan was born in the midst of a pivotal period of China’s revolutionary history, during the Great Leap Forward, an initiative which Ma Jian describes in his novel, *China Dream*, as ‘a reckless campaign to transform China into a Communist utopia’ (p. 1) and grew up during the ensuing chaos and famine of the Cultural Revolution.

Whilst popularly criticised amongst literary commentators for his reputation within the CPC apparatus, it is clear, as Anna Sun (2012) remarks, that ‘Mo Yan ... was a child of the revolution’. As a result of the policies propagated by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, Mo Yan’s access to literature was largely limited to novels in the social realist genre, whose themes of class struggle and conflict, Sun argues, have imbued Mo Yan’s use of language in his work as ‘[a] disease ... caused by the conscious renunciation of China’s cultural past at the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. [Mo Yan’s] writing is in fact a product of the aesthetic ideologies of Socialist China’. As Mao Zedong famously set out in his ‘Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art’ in 1949, writers or, as Mao referred to them (paraphrasing Lenin), ‘cogs and wheels’ in the socialist regime, ought to write for the masses: ‘China’s revolutionary writers and artists, writers and artists of promise, must go along the masses; they must for a long period of time unreservedly and wholeheartedly go among the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, go into the heat of the struggle. Only then can they proceed to creative work’.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the role of the arts attained increasing political significance as a means by which China could ‘[break] the ice between [it] and its

former adversaries' (Larson and Kraus, 1989, p. 143), and the acquisition of a 'Chinese' Nobel Prize for literature obtained paramount importance as one measure of international cultural success by Chinese artists and intellectuals under the 'so-called "open" policy of Deng Xiaoping' (p. 147). In *The Politics of Cultural Capital*, Julia Lovell (2006, p. 3) provides an authoritative account of China's 'quest' for a Nobel Prize in literature, and outlines the significance of the Nobel for China's international ambitions in the latter decades of the twentieth century:

The question of why China ... had failed for almost a century to win a Nobel Prize began to be raised with increasing urgency during the 1980s, following the Mainland's reentry into the international political, economic, and cultural realm. The quest for a Nobel Prize was promoted to the level of official policy and Nobel anxiety evolved into a "complex" (*Nuobeier qingjie*) that drew in writers, critics, and academics.

In 1979, towards the close of the Cultural Revolution, Mo Yan enlisted in the People's Liberation Army. Conceived initially as a 'Party Army', the PLA, as Edward Dreyer (2014, p. 5) describes, was indoctrinated with the ideals of a revolutionary political party that would help them transcend the limitations perceived in the warlord armies of the 1927-49 period. During his time in the PLA, Mo Yan continued to write and enjoyed considerable success, publishing his first novella, *A Transparent Radish*, in 1984 (Williford, 2011, p. 10) and receiving a literary award from the *Literature of the Liberation Army* magazine in the same year. It was also during his time in the PLA that Guan Moye 管谟业 began to publish his work under the pseudonym Mo Yan: a homonym, often addressed to him by his mother when he was a child, meaning 'don't speak' (Rothman, 2012). Using hyperbole, and referring to himself in the third person, Mo Yan addressed the choice of his pseudonym at the award ceremony of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature in March 2009, where he stated that:

back then he was thinking that he should have a pen name, since all major writers had one. As he stared at the new name that meant “don’t talk”, he was reminded of his mother’s admonition from way back. At that time, people in China were living in an unusual political climate, political struggles came in waves, one more severe than the one before, and people ... lost their sense of security. ... many people got into trouble because of things they said; a single carelessly uttered word could bring disaster to one’s life and reputation as well as ruination to one’s family ... Whenever he [Mo Yan] felt like showing off his eloquence, his mother would remind him, “Don’t talk too much.”” (2009, p. 26; translated by Sylvia Li-chun Lin)

In 1987, Mo published his first major novel, *Hong gaoliang jiazu* (*Red Sorghum Family*; translated in English by Howard Goldblatt as *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*, 1986) in the leading state-run magazine *People’s Literature* and won the fourth National Literature Prize, ‘propelling him from modest notoriety to national, and then international, fame’ (Avery, 2014, p. xv). The novel, which spans from 1923 to 1976 and centres on the hardships, love, hatred, and adventures of a peasant family in Mo’s Shandong hometown of Northeast Gaomi Township during the Japanese Occupation of China (Chan, 2000, p. 495), was adapted into an international film of the same name, launching the careers of the Chinese director Zhang Yimou as well as the lead actress Gong Li. As Andrea Riemenschnitter (2012, p. 370) notes, *Red Sorghum* was particularly well ‘received by critics as [an] aesthetic breakthrough that left behind the structural as well as the ideological shackles of socialist realism’ and established Mo Yan as one of China’s best-selling novelists both in, and out of China, whilst also fulfilling of the Chinese government’s most enduring psychological fixations: obtaining a politically tolerable Nobel laureate (Osnos, 2012).

The Chinese government's reaction to the émigré novelist, Gao Xingjian – the first Chinese-born writer to win the Nobel Prize – illustrates Osnos' earlier evocation of the CPC's anxiety in procuring a politically acceptable laureate. Upon the news of Gao's acceptance of the Prize in 2000, Lovell (2006, p. 157) highlights how 'one newspaper ran a prescheduled article bemoaning the continued lack of a Chinese laureate'. With the CPC's propaganda anticipating the potential ramifications of a Nobel laureate in exile, the censorship of Gao's Nobel win in mainland China highlights the political dilemma of China's aforementioned Nobel 'complex', namely: the concern, set upon the backdrop of the world literary economy, that a writer in exile was far more likely to find favour with the world and Nobel audiences than one based in the Mainland.

Whilst Mo Yan's fiction, which I argue in contrast to his most vocal detractors, displays a critical interpretation of history which has effectively allowed his writing to explore the contested historical context of China's turbulent twentieth century, he nevertheless remains limited by his profile as China's lauded Nobel laureate. Considered a cultural ambassador for Chinese literature following his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, Mo Yan has enjoyed continued literary popularity within Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and retains a politically favourable position within the CPC.

Continuous Concerns and Twentieth-Century Traumas

The vicissitudes of China's history in the latter half of the twentieth century, from 1950 until 2000 or what Jonathan Spence (2008) terms 'the so-called 'reform era' of post-Deng Xiaoping China,' requires consideration of literary texts which address and span this timeframe. Mo Yan's seminal novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* spans the period from 1950 until 2000. For Shelly W. Chan (2000, p. 24), Mo Yan's focus on the latter half of

the twentieth century in *Life and Death* is particularly significant in cognisance of his oeuvre to date: 'Unlike [his] previous works, which cover a range of history approximately from the republican period to the 1970s or the 1980s, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is set exclusively in the Communist era, recounting history from 1950 to 2000'. Mo Yan uses the Great Leap Forward as the backdrop for *Life and Death*. Launched in 1958, the Great Leap Forward was a campaign in which China's vast peasant population was required to cede ownership of their land and move into a commune system of collectivised farming, where all produce belonged to the state. As Chaoquan Ou (2007, p. 231) outlines in *Life in a Kam Village in Southwest China, 1930-1949*, the campaign was an initiative by which 'the Communist government began to plan for the transformation of China into a mighty industrial power ... a transformation envisioned in the slogan "Great Leap Forward" and driven through a policy of establishing vast communes ... alongside a campaign of anti-imperialist rhetoric'.

The result of the Great Leap Forward was famine and, according to Cormac Ó Gráda, (2010, p. 95), 'official Chinese data released in the early 1980s, implies an estimated cumulative excess death rate of twenty-three per thousand in 1959-61. Assuming a population of 650 million on the eve of the famine, that would mean a toll of fifteen million lives lost to famine'. Unofficial estimates vary, but historian Frank Dikötter, who was given unrestricted access to Chinese archives and is frequently cited for uncovering the likely magnitude of the famine, estimates that at least forty-five million people were 'worked, starved or beaten to death in China' (quoted in Akbar, 2010) from 1958 to 1962 and somewhere in the region of between forty and seventy million people starved to death in 'one of the most deadly mass killings of human history' (Dikötter, 2017, pp. x-xi), equivalent to the worldwide death toll of World War II (fifty-five million) and ranking Mao's tenure as the top incidence of excess mortality in human history (Short, 2005, p. 631; Fenby, 2008, p. 351).

Life and Death thus spans the entirety of the tumultuous years of the Great Leap Forward and forward into the decade of political and social upheaval sparked by Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1966.

In *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, Michael Berry (2011, p. 254) describes how 'the body of artistic representation directly connected with' the period of the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution 'far surpasses the literature produced on any other single atrocity in modern Chinese history'. Consequently, in this chapter's consideration of how significant historical events are represented in fiction, Berry notes that 'Mao's attempt to consolidate power and strengthen his leadership' during the Great Leap Forward, and the ensuing decade of the Cultural Revolution, 'became the focus of a new series of diaries, memoirs, histories, and works of fiction that grew into a robust genre during the 1980s, and an unavoidable subject for virtually all contemporary mainland writers' (p. 255). Jung Chang's 张戎 (1952—) three-generational memoir, *Wild Swans*, published in 1991, is illustrative of Berry's claim that literature 'depicting the horrors of the Cultural Revolution took over the PRC literary scene' (2011, p. 255) in the wake of Mao's death in 1976; Chang's memoir will be further alluded to – in relation to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution – later in this chapter.

The literary response in the 1980s to Mao's legacy as the top incidence of excess mortality in human history during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, as Berry further outlines, eventually '[gave] way to new literary forms in the '90s, such as the new Chinese avant-garde and new forms of commercial literature' which, nevertheless, 'continued to take the Cultural Revolution as an important concern' (2011, p. 255). Mo Yan's focus on this particular period of modern Chinese history in *Life and Death* extends Berry's timeframe into the early 2000s and suggests that, even after the traumatic events that took

place in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, ascribing meaning to the trauma of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution continues to be of concern to contemporary Chinese writers.

‘A Valuable Window on History’: Literary Reflections on Significant Historic Events

In *Life and Death*, we can see the devastating effects of the Great Leap Forward as told by the novel’s protagonist Ximen Nao. In the novel, Ximen Nao is targeted during Mao Zedong’s economic and social reform campaign and recalls being ‘trussed up like a criminal, marched off to a bridge-head and shot’ (2012, p. 4) so that his land in rural Northeast Gaomi Township (set in Mo Yan’s native Shandong province) can be redistributed. In his typical satirical amalgamation of folk tales and historical style, Mo Yan explicitly relates the ‘events of 1958’, recalling what Ximen Nao describes as ‘a valuable window on history’ in which ‘discussion of the great smelting campaign and the backyard furnaces’ are omitted, explaining – in Mo Yan’s typically stylistic ‘authorial self-inscription’ (Huang and Duran, 2014, p. 156) – that there is ‘nothing of interest there’ (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 82). Mo Yan’s protagonist, Ximen Nao, continues in his similarly self-effacing fashion:

Nor will I touch upon the communal kitchens or the great movement of farmers throughout the country. Why prattle on about things in which you were involved? As for abolishing villages and amalgamating production brigades ... well, you know more about that than I. What I’d like to relate are some experiences I ... had in 1958. ... I’ll do what I can to avoid political issues, but forgive me if they find their way into the tale. (p. 82)

We see in Ximen Nao's reader-addressed narrative an assumed knowledge of China's history: particularly the period outlined earlier by Ou (2007) as beginning in 1957, through the establishment of rural communes during the Great Leap Forward to the end of the century, at the start of the new millennium.

As indicated by Ximen Nao, the avoidance of political discourse is central to the novel's underlying narrative of what Jinghui Wang (2014, p. 142) terms 'the non-action of karma, that is, kind people are not rewarded with good retribution', and Ximen Nao's challenging of 'the existence of any unitary truth—whether voiced by the government or by dissidents' (Knight, 2014, p. 104). Indeed, neither Nao nor Mo Yan make any definitive statement regarding the social and economic reforms which devastated the rural Chinese populous following the formation of collectivised compounds from 1955 to 1957 (Chan, 2001, p. 67) preferring, instead, to unfold the historicity of China's revolutionary century upon what Howard Goldblatt (2007, p. 166) describes as 'interfamily struggles and intrigues, involving complex and sensitive historical and political issues, [which] lend the novel an allegorical quality' representative of Mo Yan's vision of twentieth-century China.

In essence, Ximen Nao's narrative exemplifies the antagonistic relationship that exists between the state and writer akin to C. T. Hsia's assessment of literary censorship in China. For Hsia, Mo Yan's political ambiguity can be aligned with that of the early twentieth-century Shanghai writer Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920-1995), whose 'registration of the inescapable pettiness and sadness of human endeavour is ... always disturbing precisely because, given the human condition, she refrains from overt gestures of indignation or protest' (Hsia, 1971, p. 414).

The CPC-run General Administration of Press and Publication oversees literary censorship and exists as the government's administrative agency responsible for screening

books discussing ‘important topics’, and usefully describes these – relevant to the texts discussed in this chapter – as:

- (ii) Works and literature concerning any former or current leaders of the party or the nation, and selections concerning the circumstances of their lives or work
- (vii) Topics which deal with the ‘Cultural Revolution’
- (viii) Topics which deal with any significant historical matters or important historical figures in the history of the Chinese Communist Party⁸

Under the GAPP, instances of literary censorship reveal the state’s anxiety over politically polemic publications, despite the ‘freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration’ enshrined in Article 35 of the Constitution of the PRC (*Constitution*, p. 32). This dichotomy between the state’s projection of censorship and the reality of publishing in mainland China illustrates what Kerry Brown (2014, p. 206) terms ‘the great binary of the narrative of Chinese history after 1949’, which posits a system whereby China’s history is both countermanded and undermined by the CPC’s nihilistic suppression of any discourse other than its ‘official’ state narrative.⁹ This contradiction is not only rooted in state ideology, but also in historical precedent, which presents an important understanding of why writers, such as Mo Yan and Zhang Ailing (who I briefly now discuss), abstain from direct political discourse and hence why didactic leanings within texts appear to be, for the most part, preferred by many contemporary Chinese writers.

⁸ For a full English translation with the Chinese text, see ‘Notice Regarding the Printing and Promulgation of the ‘Measures on the Recording of Important Topics of Books, Periodicals, Audio/Visual Productions and Electronic Publications,’’ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Virtual Academy, 10 Oct. 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080828213346/http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/exp/explaws.php#importanttopicslaw>. Accessed: 7 Aug. 2018.

⁹ Reports of censorship in China are many and frequent; for an updated repository of journalism on censorship in China, see *South China Morning Post*, ‘Censorship in China,’ available at: <https://www.scmp.com/topics/censorship-china> (Accessed: 7 August 2018).

Acclaimed as a burgeoning young writer in the early years of the twentieth century, Zhang Ailing grew up in Shanghai and enrolled in the English department at the University of Hong Kong from 1939 to 1941 where she excelled academically (Leung, 1988, p. 87). However, in 1941, when the Japanese occupied Hong Kong, Zhang was forced to suspend her studies before returning to Shanghai in 1942. Upon her return to Shanghai, she enjoyed a brief period of literary fame ‘from the foundation of two early works *Chuanqi* (*Romance* 1943), [and] *Liuyan* (*Written on Water* 1944)’ (Ma, 2011, p. 126) and continued to publish until her migration to the United States in 1955 (quoted in Louie, 2012, p. 193) after which she became reclusive, despite earning a newfound readership ‘as a result of the wholesale re-examination of literary history in post-Mao China’ (Huang, 2005, p. x). Zhang’s work traverses many styles, subjects and genres, but one constant theme is her exploration of time, nationality and the quotidian, but also transient, nature of her surrounding urban environments. Zhang Ailing has long been considered a writer whose oeuvre is hermetically disengaged with the broader strokes of early twentieth-century Chinese politics. Yet, as McCormick (2007) argues: ‘to call [Zhang Ailing] a non-political writer would be markedly inaccurate’. Her ‘almost apocalyptic vision of the destruction of all civilization’ (Zhang, 1999, p.242) is particularly evident in her short stories *Lust*, *Caution* (Se, Jie, 1979) and *Love in a Fallen City* (*Qingcheng zhilan*, 1943), the latter of which, Chow (1991, p. 85) argues is inherently reflective of Zhang’s ability to capture the contemporary feeling of ‘entrapment, destruction, and desolation’ of pre-Second World War Shanghai. Indeed, parallel to what I will show in my analysis of Mo Yan, much of Zhang’s writing shares thematic similarities with her twentieth-century successors, focusing on wider dialogues of class, oppression and collective memory: all purportedly non-political subjects which comprise the volume of her work. It is ironic, then, that politics would be a force which would ultimately determine the course of the later part of Zhang’s career, a fate she shares with fellow writer Ma Jian, whose

works' 'echoes of the Cultural Revolution' (Branigan, 2011) no doubt elicited considerable nervousness within the GAPP.

By contrast with Mo Yan and Zhang Ailing, whose work abstains from direct political discourse, Ma Jian, whose I analyse in greater depth in Chapter Three, explicitly evokes the traumas of China's twentieth century. Here, I highlight the secondary accounts of the Cultural Revolution which arise in the fractured recollection of *Beijing Coma*'s young protagonist-narrator, Dai Wei, as he revisits memories and events prior to the 'demonstration in Tiananmen Square' (2008, p. 131) whilst 'lying unconscious in a hospital' (p. 2) in his titular coma: the result of a 'shot [to] the head ... fired from a handgun by someone standing at eye-level ... on the pavement to [Dai Wei's] side' (p. 379). The most overtly vitriolic of the novel's references to the Cultural Revolution arises from Dai Wei's memory of a conversation with Dr Song, a surgeon and loose connection of Dai Wei's friend, A-Mei, who 'during the national campaign to rectify past wrongs ... was transferred to the Revolutionary Committee to research the history of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi Province' (p. 60).

In an ancillary subplot, recalling events prior to his coma, in which Dai Wei (informed by his recently deceased father's journals) travels to Guangxi province seeking to uncover his father's experience in the 'reform-through-labour system' (p. 55), Dr Song delineates the toll of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi province:

the literal meaning of the Chinese characters for "revolution" is "elimination of life."
See this collection of books my research team has just brought out: *Chronicles of the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi Province*. Look ... in 1968, more than 100,000 people were killed in Guangxi Province. In Wuxuan County alone, 3,523 people were murdered and of those, 350 were eaten. (p. 63)

Dai Wei continues his enquiry, asking Dr Song to attribute accountability to the causalities of the Cultural Revolution. Dr Song elucidates: ‘Who were the murderers? You could argue that the only real murderer was Chairman Mao. But the fact is, everyone was involved. ... You ask me who the murderers were. The answer is everyone! Our neighbours, our friends across the street’ (p. 63). Aside from addressing each of the GAPP’s aforementioned ‘important topics’, Dr Song’s description of the toll of the Cultural Revolution and, in particular, his labelling of Chairman Mao as a ‘murderer’ highlights the contentious relationship between literature and the censorship mechanisms of the GAPP in the novel’s open condemnation of Mao’s legacy.

Similarly, in a recent example of the state’s continued sensitivity over published references to the Cultural Revolution, Mandy Zuo (2018) reports that ‘changes made to a middle-school history textbook’s chapter on the Cultural Revolution ... sparked controversy’ after pictures appeared to show that a chapter formerly devoted ‘to the political movement in China in the 1960s and 1970s ... had been altered to remove a reference to the Communist Party’. According to the textbook’s publisher, the People’s Education Press, the ‘chapter’s original title ‘The 10 years of the Cultural Revolution’ had now been changed to ‘Arduous Exploration and Development Achievements’. In *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*, Zhang Longxi (2005, p. 237) suggests that the screening of subversive literary content stems from the legacy of Mao himself and describes how:

for a long period of time, except for Mao’s own works, no books were exempt from suspicion in China, and virtually all literary works were condemned as reactionary and poisonous, because they were either “feudalist” (traditional Chinese literature), or “capitalist” (Western literature) or “revisionist” (Soviet and Eastern European literature).

Whilst *Beijing Coma* does not neatly fall into any of these categories, the novel's open and singularly critical descriptions of the Cultural Revolution has nevertheless ensured that the novel (and Ma Jian himself) remain banned in China to this day: a casualty, too, of 'The Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalization [which] was launched in early 1987' during which Ma Jian's earlier collection, *Stick Out Your Tongue*, published that year, 'was denounced as a piece of filth masquerading as "experimental" fiction' (Skeel, 2015, p. 491).¹⁰ As I show in Chapter Three's discussion of *Stick Out Your Tongue*, Ma Jian was officially banned by the authorities upon leaving China in 1986 to travel in Tibet, with 'no reason for the ban or any indication of how long it will last' (Branigan, 2011).

In order to remain in favour with the state, Chinese writers have little choice but to compromise their literary output to topics deemed suitable for public consumption by the GAPP. This discourse was brought to a head in October 2009, when China was invited as the 'guest of honour' to the Frankfurt Book Fair, which critics claimed demonstrated complicity with China's state-sponsored censorship and about which Ma Jian is quoted in Roberts' *A History of China*: 'There is little need for literary censors these days ... Chinese fiction is in the main a fiction of compromise' (2011, p. 320). Returning to Mo Yan's *Life and Death*, this compromise is again enacted by the novel's protagonist, Ximen Nao's, description of the effects of the Great Leap Forward. Employing a discursive rhetoric directed at his reader, Mo Yan calls upon his reader's assumed familiarity with the establishment of people's communes and abolition of villages and backyard steel furnaces, which were encouraged by Mao Zedong until his discovery – upon his visit to Manchuria in January 1957 – that 'high-quality

¹⁰ In his 'self-imposed exile in London' (Mishra, 2008), Ma Jian has become a prominent critic of the CPC leadership and its relationship with the 'destructive legacy' of the Cultural Revolution. See: Ma Jian, (2016), 'A Son of the Cultural Revolution', *Project Syndicate*, 10 May. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-xi-jinping-mao-zedong-parallels-by-ma-jian-2016-05> (Accessed: 27 July 2018).

steel can [only] be produced in huge modern factories using reliable fuel, like coal' and not, as had been the case, on 'cooking fuel [...] doors and furniture' (Li, 2011, pp. 290-91).

When the disaster of the Great Leap Forward had run its course, several of the CPC's more pragmatic leaders took over the reins of the economy from Mao. It was during this period that Deng Xiaoping, who would later go on to openly criticise Mao's legacy, first made his famous remark about not caring whether a 'cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice' (quoted in Li, 1977, p. 107). Beijing-born contemporary artist and poet Ma Desheng 馬德升 (b.1952) was among the first to address Deng Xiaoping's 'black and white cat' aphorism. A founding member of the group 'Les Étoiles', the first avant-garde artistic movement in China, Desheng, alongside Huang Rui 黃銳 (b.1952), Li Shuang 李爽 (b.1957), Zhong Acheng 钟阿城 (b.1949) and iconoclastic artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b.1957), organised two exhibitions that broke the orthodoxy of the Communist Party and laid the groundwork for the future of artistic expression in China. Unlike his predecessor, Chairman Mao, Deng Xiaoping was not overly concerned with a citizen's revolutionary zeal, as long as he or she was capable of doing the job efficiently. In other words, fealty to Mao was superseded by the production of goods. In contrast, Ma Desheng's cats, however, both appear to be fast asleep.

The legacy of the decade-long Cultural Revolution was one which most historians consider as having 'changed the face of Chinese culture from an orderly and harmonious society to one of madness and chaos' (Kraus, 2012, p. 98).¹¹ As alluded to earlier, in *Wild Swans* (1991), Jung Chang – the daughter of high Party officials – illustrates the abstruse nature of Mao's reforms, reflecting on how she and her classmates were instructed to remove

¹¹ For first-hand accounts of various victims' lives during of the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976, see Jicai Feng (1996), *Ten Years of Madness: Oral Histories of China's Cultural Revolution*, San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals.

the grass on the school's lawn because 'Mao had instructed that grass, flowers, and pets were bourgeois habits and were to be eliminated' (p. 272). Similarly, in an interview with Canadian author Madeleine Thein on the publication of her novel, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), Claire Armitstead (2016) notes the irony that while western music was being destroyed all over China during the Cultural Revolution, Mao had a symphony orchestra in Beijing. Discussing Thein's use of music as a theme throughout the novel, Armitstead (2016) further notes that 'Thein builds this paradox into the novel: it is structured as theme and variations, taking its cue from Sparrow's obsession with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, as performed over several decades by the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould.'

During the Cultural Revolution, literary production was also overshadowed by the mass print circulation of Mao's *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, known colloquially as *hong baoshu* ('red treasure book') in Chinese. Printed over one billion times between 1966 and 1971, it achieved supreme importance as the ultimate guide to political action and moral behaviour (Leese, 2014, p. 23) and survives as an icon of China and communism, as well as a work of propaganda, despite now being almost universally associated with the Mao-related 'nostalgia' and the communist 'kitsch' of a bygone period of Chinese history (Barmé, 1996, p. 183; Benton, 2008, p. 168).¹² Upon Mao's death, and the fall of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976, China slowly retreated from the decade-long irrationality of the Cultural Revolution.

By the early 1980's, Deng Xiaoping had returned to power, and declared that the Cultural Revolution was 'responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses

¹² Numbers vary between 1.02 and 1.09 billion official copies; for a fuller assessment of the publication and reception of Mao's *Quotations*, see Daniel Leese's chapter, 'A Single Spark: Origins and Spread of the Little Red Book in China,' in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, edited by Alexander C. Cook, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 23-43. In his book, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution*, Leese (2013, p. 108) similarly notes that between 1966 and 1976, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, 'some 10.8 billion Mao texts or posters were printed by the state, making Mao the best-selling author ever'.

suffered by the Party, the country, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic' (*Resolution*, p. 32). Under Deng Xiaoping, the CPC gradually began to dismantle the Maoist policies associated with the Cultural Revolution and, in doing so, launched China into a period of sustained economic growth. Unlike the Soviet Union, where the Communist Party lost political omnipotency and democracy was attempted, the CPC retained political control under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and, during the 1980's, heralded the beginning of China's economic growth by permitting an increasing amount of free enterprise, transforming China's infrastructure into what has become the world's second-largest economy.

As will be shown in Chapter Three, it was against this backdrop of rising prosperity and socio-demographic aspirations, raised by improving socio-economic conditions and burgeoning social affluence that the Tiananmen Square protests occurred in 1989. In the ensuing confrontation between students, and the eventual military crackdown by the CPC, the political leaders of the Communist Party made clear that the democratisation of political control in China was uncompromisingly non-negotiable; China's socialist market economy continued to flourish (Galvez, 2012), but any move which posed a sustained and substantial political challenge to the Party was ruthlessly and swiftly suppressed. The success of Beijing's state-imposed amnesia means that any discussion of what Beijing considers to be politically problematic historic events in the public sphere becomes a challenge to the CPC's 'official' narrative of history. However, the ways in which the authors I highlight in this thesis represent significant historical events within their work suggests that literary fiction has the capacity to subtly negotiate the censorship mechanisms of the CPC and thus engage in a critical re-evaluation of history under the context of a regime which deliberately edits its historical narrative of the past.

A Subtle Negotiation: Bypassing the Censors in *Life and Death Are Wearing*

Me Out

Of Mo Yan's publications, *Life and Death*, his tenth novel in his typically 'hallucinatory realism' (Chi-ying, 2014, p. 124; Goldblatt, 2014, p. 23) style, for which he was publicly recognised by being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, is significant. It represents a novel which subtly negotiates the CPC's censorship apparatus in its evocation of The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution: two significant historical events the 'official' narrative of which are closely guarded by the CPC. For Mo Yan, however, the Nobel Prize was a contentious affair which elicited corresponding support and criticism from commentators both within China, and across the international community. In China, Mo Yan's achievement was lauded by the *People's Daily* as 'the first time for a writer of Chinese nationality to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. ... Today is the day that Chinese writers have waited too long, and the Chinese people have waited for too long' (Wang, 2012). As mentioned earlier, however, internationally, Mo Yan is not considered the first Chinese author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, which was awarded in 2000 to the exiled writer Gao Xingjian 高行健, (b.1940) whose work, notably, was banned in China after the publication of his 1989 play *Taowang (Escape)* in *Jintian (Today)* literary magazine. 'Written within months of the Tiananmen Square massacre' *Escape* recalled the events of June Fourth, 1989 as 'its three characters take refuge from the army crackdown in a warehouse, amid ... cynicism about self-proclaimed heroes' (Jaggi, 2008). Unlike Mo Yan, Gao Xingjian's prize was not lauded by the Chinese state, whose 'official ... reaction to Gao's award was that the selection of Gao, as a French citizen whose works had been banned in China for years, was a deliberate provocation by the Swedish Academy and undeserved by Gao' (Goldblatt, 2007, p.

165).¹³ By contrast, in the run up to the announcement of the Nobel Prize, Mo Yan faced criticism from Western media was quoted in response to the criticism levelled at his nomination. Speaking to *Business Standard*, he said: ‘I don’t want to talk about the Nobel Prize, because every word about the prize will be criticised. Many people criticise that Chinese writers have anxiety about the Nobel Prize, and I have received more criticisms like this than others’ (2012).

Critics of Mo Yan’s acceptance of the Nobel Prize included Professor of East Asian Studies Perry Link, fellow magical realist writer Salman Rushdie, and the second author on whom this thesis focuses, Ma Jian, who ‘deplored the lack of solidarity and commitment of Mo Yan for other Chinese writers and intellectuals who were punished or detained for taking a critical view of the state of affairs in Communist China’ (“From cowherd”, 2012). Ma Jian, in particular, levelled criticism at Mo Yan for his capitulation to the Chinese government by not using the international presence of the prize as an opportunity to express solidarity with Chinese writers and dissidents who were detained in violation of their constitutionally protected freedom of expression (as illustrated earlier in Article 35 of the Constitution of the PRC). He cited the case of the Chinese writer, human rights activist and, latterly, political prisoner Liu Xiaobo, who was present during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and who himself was notably awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 ‘for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China’ (“The Nobel Peace Prize 2010”).

¹³ For an interesting account of Gao Xingjian as a dramatist, and a reflection of the author’s own experience of producing his 1983 play *The Bus Stop* for the University of Michigan, see Claire Conceison (2012), ‘Fleshing out the Dramaturgy of Gao Xingjian,’ *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/conceison/>; and, for wider elucidation of Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan in relation to the Nobel Prize in Literature in China, see Howard Goldblatt, ‘Fictional China,’ *China’s Transformations: The Stories Beyond the Headlines*, edited by Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, pp. 163-176.

That Mo Yan, a writer who the CPC's de facto propaganda chief Li Changchun 李长春 (b.1944) claimed, 'reflects the prosperity and progress of Chinese literature, as well as the increasing influence of China' (quoted in Bodeen, 2012), finds himself isolated by his contemporaries including one of those discussed in this thesis tells us much about the relationship that exists between the artist and the state in twenty-first century Chinese literature. 'He defends censorship', Salman Rushdie stated upon Mo Yan acceptance of the award, 'and won't sign the petition asking for the freedom of his fellow Nobelism Liu Xiaobo. Hard to avoid the conclusion that Mo Yan is ... a patsy of the régime' (quoted in Daley, 2012).

Yet, despite Mo Yan's (at least publicly projected) political neutrality, we begin to see the subtle negotiation of the 'boundaries of self-censorship [which] has steadily diminished free expression both within China's borders and beyond' (Lim, 2014, p. ix). In *Life and Death*, this subtle algebra of self-censorship is cast upon the heavy canvas of China's Cultural Revolution: again, one of the GAPP's incendiary 'important topics'. In Mo Yan's case, Kerry Brown's (2014) assessment of 'the great binary of ... China', again, comes full circle.

At once lauded 'in purely literary terms' for his 'brilliance and popularity' (Aw, 2012), and equally reviled by his critics for his 'stance on censorship [belying] a commitment to collective cultural amnesia' (Khong, 2012), Mo Yan resides – much like his protagonist Ximen Nao's cyclical existence under Lord Yama's rule – in the liminal space between his public persona as a writer of considerable raconteur and his role as a political instrument of the CPC. But I suggest that it is precisely his position within this liminal space that affords Mo Yan some degree of creativity in responding to wider concerns surrounding censorship

and the writer's ability to reflect upon and represent history within their work from underneath an authoritarian regime.

Unlike writers such as Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, whose collective works have, at various points in time, been banned in mainland China, Mo Yan is unique in becoming 'one of a handful of Chinese writers who have gained a worldwide readership while retaining a huge following at home' (Aw, 2012), whilst simultaneously maintaining his reputation with the Chinese authorities. So, in *Life and Death*, when Ximen Nao tells the reader in relation to the Great Leap Forward, 'well, you know more about that than I' (2012, p. 82), he is not being a self-effacingly obtuse narrator, but is instead dialoguing with and challenging a history that is systematically and legislatively sensitive for the CPC. In effect, Ximen Nao's narrative is a means through which Mo Yan is can subtly bypass the radar of the GAPP's 'important topics' apparatus, whilst simultaneously telling the reader: 'I know that you know that we both know about the Great Leap Forward.'

Life and Death presents a sweeping narrative of the latter half of China's revolutionary century. The novel, according to Julia Lovell (2012, p. 15), is reflective of the dominance in Chinese literature of realist fiction and grand narratives which has (re)turned the historical novel in China 'into the pre-eminent serious fictional genre of the last fifteen years'. Reflecting Lovell's assertion upon Mo Yan's oeuvre during this period, Shelly W. Chan (2011, pp. 60-61) explicates in her book *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan* – a critical exposition of Mo Yan's entire body of literary work – that, 'beginning with *Sandalwood Punishment*, Mo Yan has consciously returned to the format of classical literature'. In particular, '*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is written in a traditional Chinese novelistic style, namely, the *zhanghui* ('chapter') style, which divides the novel into many chapters, each of which is titled with a couplet that gives the reader an inkling of its contents'.

Life and Death's title itself draws from 'The Second Appreciation' of the Bodhisattva's Eight Appreciations Sutra, 'The weariness of *life and death* arises from greed; when one eschews our desires, we will find peace in our body and mind' (*ba da ren juejing* 生死疲勞，從貪慾起，少欲無為，身心自在). This is irreverently translated into English by Howard Greenblatt to reflect the ill-fortune of its protagonist and the novel recounts the rebirths and Buddhist transmigrations from the point of view of the Ximen Village landlord, Ximen Nao, 'in epic style from 1950 to 2000, narrating a half century of Chinese experience from the perspective of five animals – the reincarnations of a man executed in the score-settling terror of Land Reform' (Lovell, 2012, p. 15).

In the opening sequence of the novel, following his execution at the hands of 'the poor township people' (Mo Yan, 2012, p. 4) of North Gaomi County, Ximen Nao is called to trail in the halls of the wrathful Buddhist god Yama's underworld to answer to an undisclosed charge against his actions in his now previous life. Here, Mo Yan sets out the multifaceted cultural scope of *Life and Death*, evoking the Buddhist concept of *samsāra* or the unceasing cycle of birth, death and rebirth which underpins the novel's narrative structure, returning Ximen Nao to the land of the living at the start of the novel 'as a white-hoofed donkey' (p. 9) to atone for his crimes in his first and, simultaneously, previous life.

Divided into a series of five 'books', which align with Ximen Nao's five successive animal reincarnations; first as a donkey, then as an ox, followed by a pig, a dog, and a monkey, before being finally reborn at the beginning 'of Gaomi County's new century' as 'a millennium boy' (p. 539), Mo Yan structurally superimposes *Life and Death* over the bhavacakra: the symbolic representation of the Buddhist 'wheel of cyclic existence' (Nāgārjuna, 2007, p. 98). Yet, despite its aesthetic structural composition, the use of the term 'Buddhist' itself interestingly only occurs once throughout the entirety of the text, appearing

(in both the English and Chinese versions) in the first sequence of Ximen Nao's spiritual journey whilst recalling Wu Cheng'en's 吴承恩 (c.1500-1582)¹⁴ c.1592 novel, *Journey to the West*: one of the Four Great Classical Novels (*Sida mingzhu*) of Chinese literature.¹⁵

Mo Yan further recalls *Journey to the West* whilst Ximen Nao is escorted through 'the halls of hell' (p. 7) by Yama's two 'attendants ... called Ox Head and Horse Face' who, Ximen Nao describes as, '[bearing] no resemblance to the underworld figures we are used to seeing in paintings' and are, instead, 'totally human in appearance, except ... for their skin, whose color was iridescent blue, as if treated with a magical dye' (p. 6). Following his journey through the underworld, Ximen Nao's ethereal spirit returns to Northeast Gaomi Township where he is forced to revisit the site of his traumatic execution before being 'propelled forward' (p. 9) by Ox Head and Horse Face into the first cycle of *samsāra*. During his reiterative journey through his village, Ximen Nao describes how:

we encountered a group of men on stilts who were re-enacting the travels of the Tang Monk Tripitaka on his way to fetch Buddhist scriptures. His disciples, Monkey and Pigsy, were both villagers I knew, and I learned from the slogans on the banners they were carrying and from what they were saying that it was the first day of 1950. (pp. 7-8)

Recalling Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*, which recounts the story of the monk Tripitaka's journey to Dahila (a moniker for India in ancient China) to retrieve the complete Pali Canon of the Theravada branch of Buddhism, Mo Yan is at his stylistically most playful,

¹⁴ Exact dates vary. In his Introduction to Jenner's translation of *Journey to the West*, Shi Changyu (1999, p. 7) places Wu Cheng'en's lifetime in the region of the early sixteenth century, suggesting that Wu Cheng'en lived between A.D. 1505 and 1580, but Shi concedes that 'his exact dates are not known'.

¹⁵ Written between the fourteenth- and eighteenth-century, The Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, comprising of Shi Nai'an's *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi*), Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji*) and Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou Meng*) are among the world's longest and oldest novels, and are considered to be the four great literary masterpieces of pre-modern Chinese fiction (Shep, 2011, p. 596).

drawing an intertextual comparison between Tripitaka's physical journey to enlightenment and Ximen Nao's spiritual one. Readers familiar with Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* will notice how Mo Yan draws a direct, didactic parallel between Tripitaka and Ximen Nao through the latter's description of Tripitaka's 'disciples, Monkey and Pigsy'. In *Life and Death*, Mo Yan not only recalls the tale of Tripitaka, but also establishes his protagonist as his novel's version of Tripitaka by alluding to the latter's disciples as villagers Ximen Nao once knew in his previous life. Similarly, Mo Yan evokes the aforementioned characters of Ox Head and Horse Face, who escort Ximen Nao through Yama's underworld, and who serve a similar function in *Journey to the West* (albeit less successfully than in *Life and Death*) where they are directed to arrest Tripitaka's disciple, Monkey, on the behest of Yama, the King of Death. In *Journey to the West*, this sequence is similarly played out. Upon 'binding Monkey's dream-body' and preparing to take him to the 'Land of Darkness' (Yama's underworld), Wu Cheng'en describes how: 'Monkey ... became very angry, ... and pounded the two messengers into mincemeat. Then he freed himself from his bonds, and swinging his staff strode into the city. Bull-headed demons and horse-faced demons fled before him in terror' (p. 42).

Yet, despite the distinct narrative parallels between *Life and Death* and *Journey to the West*, to read *Life and Death* as simply an attempt to revisit a literary classic of pre-modern Chinese fiction would be reductive to the broader narrative strokes of Ximen Nao's narrative. Mo Yan's amalgamation of classical Chinese literary allusions, as well as his employment of intertextuality, goes beyond the boundaries of Chinese literature's cultural repertoire, drawing parallels, through his use, for example, of *Tristram Shandy*-esque Rabelaisian chapter subtitles, 'Ouch, Ximen Donkey Loses a Gonad / A Colossal Hero Arrives at the Estate' (p.69) to the eighteenth-century novel. Drawing a similar connection with the novel in relation to Mo Yan's wider oeuvre, Howard Goldblatt (2007, p. 166) directs

our attention to *Jiuguo* (*The Republic of Wine*, 1992), in which ‘Mo Yan’s purpose dawns upon [the reader] gradually as we discover a fictional structure unlike anything we are likely to have seen before, perhaps Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* offering the closest parallel’. Connected to Mo Yan’s evocation of intertextual stylistic conventions is *Life and Death*’s cyclical overarching narrative, beginning and ending with ‘My story begins on January 1, 1950’ (pp. 3 and 540, respectively). This evokes not only the concepts of rebirth associated with the Buddhist wheel of transmigration (Teiser, 2006, p.3), but also a Joycean ‘cyclical theory of history which postulates three ages—the divine, the heroic, and the human, followed by a *ricorso* or a period of transition and renewal (marked in *Finnegan’s Wake* by the thunderclap)’ (Fargnoli and Gillespie, 1995, p.91, emphasis in original).

Finally, the closing sequence of *Life and Death* appears more than stylistically indebted to the prophesised birth of Saleem Sinai – who is also later synonymously referred to as ‘Buddha’ – in Salman Rushdie’s postcolonial novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981). In *Life and Death*’s concluding description of Ximen Nao’s final reincarnation is as a ‘millennium boy ... come into the world via a normal birth’ and who ‘differed from other children’ on account of having ‘a remarkably big head, in which near total recall and a extraordinary gift for language existed’ (2012, pp. 539-54). As set out in the Introduction to this thesis, it is worth recalling that, for Chinese authors, Lovell (2012) claims this intertextual and intercultural amalgamation of narrative interplay goes beyond aesthetic individualism; it is political, with authors such as Mo Yan, Yan Lianke and Ma Jian who, ‘for all their stylistic differences ... are united by their obsession with Chinese politics, a creative preoccupation that risks subordinating individual, emotional experience to the big, collective story of modern nation-building’ (p. 19). Whereas Tripitaka, the protagonist of *Journey to the West*, achieves spiritual enlightenment through his physical journey to the West and is, ultimately, responsible for enshrining a broader national theological narrative as a result of bringing

Buddhism from India back into China, Ximen Nao's narrative begins in 1950, in the heart of China's revolutionary century. If, as Lovell (2012) suggests, Mo Yan's creative preoccupation is in pursuing the 'big, collective story of modern-nation-building', *Life and Death* is not simply a novel detailing one man's journey to enlightenment through spiritual transmigration, it is an effort to ascribe a narrative to a nation still coming to terms with its history after more than half a century of political upheaval and change. However, the trials which Ximen Nao encounters in his journey through the wheel of transmigration also acts as a veiled warning to Mo Yan's readers about the potentially perilous cyclical nature of history itself.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the different fictional means by which Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* negotiates the CPC's narrative of significant historical events in China. In this chapter's reading of *Life and Death*, I have attempted to show how Mo Yan's interpretation of significant historical events adopts a spiritual contemplation of a nation coming to terms with the traumatic events of China's twentieth century. In this chapter's reading of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, I argue that the novel negotiates the CPC's censorship apparatus, despite its allusions to the Great Leap Forward which, as we have seen, is one of the 'important topics' highlighted by the GAPP. The text spans the period from 1950 to 2000 and is singularly significant within Mo Yan's oeuvre as his only novel to date which is set exclusively in the Communist era (Chan, 2011, p. 24).

This chapter's analysis of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* emphasises Mo Yan's reputation and the novel's central themes of rebirth and repetition, citing the international criticism Mo Yan faced upon his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. It

argues that *Life and Death* – in its allusions to the Buddhist cycle of transmigration, intertextuality and intercultural interplay – represents a novel which, despite the criticism faced by its author, is deeply concerned with the potentially perilous cyclical nature of historical rewriting under the CPC's authoritarian narrative of history.

Chapter Three: Writing Against the State: Memory and Dreams in the Work of Ma Jian

Introduction

Where the previous chapter's analysis of Mo Yan's *Life and Death* charts the experience of China's revolutionary period, Ma Jian's 'epic-sized novel' (Persky, 2011, p. 214) *Beijing Coma*, first published in English in 2008 and translated from Chinese by Flora Drew, begins in the decade preceding the 1989 protests of Tiananmen Square and extends to the late 1990s, offering a narrative of 4 June 1989 which is often considered as one of the 'fullest treatment[s] of Tiananmen] in literature to date—as at once history and myth' (Kong, 2012, p. 208). As this chapter will show, within the political machinations of the CPC's censorship apparatus, Ma Jian's body of work exists in stark contrast to Mo Yan's subtle negotiation of the Chinese government's authoritarian regime, with *Beijing Coma* emerging as Ma Jian's magnum opus of political dissidence in his literary output to date. Perhaps the contrast between Mo Yan and Ma Jian should be considered unsurprising; unlike Mo Yan, Ma Jian's literary career has been indelibly marked by controversy within Mainland China, particularly following the publication of a series of short stories entitled *Stick Out Your Tongue*, which was published in the prestigious literary magazine *Renmin wenxue* (*People's Literature*) in 1987.

Prior to *Stick Out Your Tongue*'s publication, Ma Jian lived in Beijing amongst a small community of local artists and writers and, consequently, frequently found himself on the radar of the Chinese authorities. The threat from the authority's local Public Security Bureau (PBS) in Beijing was not solely an intellectual one and, according to Hladíková

(2013, p. 69-70), Ma was physically rebuked during several campaigns in the first half of the 1980s. As a result (and in order to avoid inciting further political indictment), Ma abandoned Beijing, undertaking a year-long expedition around China. This expedition, which Ma Jian later published as the part-memoir, part ‘Chinese travel book of the 1980s’ (Şandru, 2010, p.103) *Red Dust* in 2001, would ultimately lead him to Tibet and consequently inspired him to write the collection of stories that became *Stick Out Your Tongue*.

As alluded to in Chapter Two, *Stick Out Your Tongue* was denounced as ‘spiritual pollution’ (Mannes-Abbott, 2006) by the Chinese authorities and was harshly criticized for its ‘misrepresentation of the Tibetan nationality’, subsequently being chosen as one of the CPC’s main targets in their ongoing ‘Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalization’ (Hladíková, 2013, p. 69). Indeed, the official reception of the book was so vitriolic that it led to the ‘Ma Jian Affair’, which is frequently cited as one of the most infamous political scandals in modern Chinese literature (Schiaffini, 2004, p. 37). In his afterword to the English publication of *Stick Out Your Tongue* in 2006,¹⁶ Ma Jian reflects that the Chinese authorities’ response to the series’ publication as a ‘vulgar, obscene book that defames the image of our Tibetan compatriots’ (p. 85) elicited an antithetical response, ‘by branding it a work of “pornography”’, Ma suggests, ‘the government had created an interest in the book that they hadn’t intended’ (p. 86).

Many critics have assigned the controversy surrounding *Stick Out Your Tongue* to its representation of the Tibetan people as outsiders, besieged by unrecognizable poverty, and one in which the Tibet Autonomous Region’s capital, Lhasa, ‘has become a dirty, polluted city like any other you might find in China’ (Ma Jian, 2006, p. 88): far removed from the

¹⁶ Translated by Ma Jian’s partner and translator, Flora Drew, a graduate in Chinese, who collaborated with Ma on a documentary organising a protest of writers and artists against the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China on 1 July 1997, and with whom he lives in London, following his self-imposed exile from China in 1999 (Tonkin, 2008; Merritt, 2004).

westernized ideal of Tibet as an earthy paradise or ‘a mystical Shangri-La’ (p. 89). But perhaps a more nuanced approach to the text can be advanced by literary symbolism in the collection’s evocation of the bodily act of ‘sticking one’s tongue out’.

Seltzer (2015) notes that this non-verbal act has received no authoritative systematic, comprehensive, or cross-cultural, analysis in literary critical studies. Nevertheless, a more general examination of the gesture in nonverbal communication studies postulates that ‘sticking out your tongue’ may oscillate any intended meaning between ‘a friendly greeting’ and ‘a sign of rejection’ (Calero, 2008, p. 114). In relation to Ma Jian’s *Stick Out Your Tongue*, however, I would suggest that a direct correlation can be made aligning Ma’s dissident political leanings and involvement in the Tiananmen Square protests and the publication of the text to the emergence of ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ in the PRC during the 1980s.

If, as has been established by Geremie Barmé (2000, p. 404), we take *Stick Out Your Tongue*’s literal translation from its original Chinese, ‘*Liangchu nide shetai huo kongkong dangdang*,’ into ‘Stick out Your Furry Tongue, or Fuck All’, in English, the connotation to ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ rebelliousness akin to ‘sticking your tongue out at authority’ (Turner, 1999, p. 13) becomes significant and this can be contextualized by the publication of Liu Yiran’s 1988 novella *Rock ‘n Roll Kids*¹⁷ (published in 1988, a year after *Stick Out Your Tongue*) and the adoption of Cui Jian’s Mandarin rock song ‘Nothing to My Name’ (*Yi Wu Suoyou*, 1986) as the unofficial anthem for Chinese youth and activists during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. The song, which was inspired by Western social and political songwriters, such as Bob Dylan and John Lennon (DeWoskin, 2004; Matusitz, 2010, p. 7), simultaneously heralded the establishment of Chinese rock as a musical genre in its own right (Steen, 2000,

¹⁷ Also translated as ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Youth’ (*Yaogun qingnian*) and *Rock Kids* (Zhou, 2007, p. 105), *Rock ‘n’ Roll Kids* is notable for being lambasted by one enraged critic for its excessive use of foul language. For a partial translation of Liu’s story, see ‘Rocking Tiananmen,’ *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, edited by Barmé and Jaivin, pp. 5-22; and Han Wuxi (1989), ‘Guoma jihui,’ *Wenxue ziyoutan*, 4, p. 89.

p. 19), as well as becoming the anthem of the Tiananmen Square protesters, where Cui performed the song live in 1989 (cited in Clark, 2012, p. 152).

We know from the author's first-hand accounts of the event that Ma Jian was present at Tiananmen Square during the crackdown of 1989, and it is reasonable to speculate that he would likely have been amongst the crowd of fellow students gathered to hear Cui Jian perform 'Nothing to My Name' in the Square. In a featured piece for the *Guardian* in 2009 entitled "The great Tiananmen taboo", written to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests, Ma Jian recalls the events leading to June Fourth. The article notably highlights Ma Jian's experience of being in the Square alongside his fellow protesters: 'I was on Tiananmen Square with the students, living in their makeshift tents and joining their jubilant singing of the Internationale. In the two decades since, each time I have gone back, visions from those days seem to return with increasing persistence'. Clearly, *Stick Out Your Tongue* owes its titular 'rock 'n' roll' sensibility, at least partly, to the influence of multiple converging genres used as a means of expressing public dissent in 1980s China.

Ma Jian's presence during the Tiananmen Square protests, his banning from mainland China, and his subsequent statements on the CPC's continued public suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests, are indicative of a writer whose self-awareness of the inimical relationship between his work and the Chinese state can only be considered as one of open indignation of the Chinese authorities. Writing in 2014, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, Ma Jian reflects that 'it was unimaginable to me ... that 25 years later, this barbaric regime would still be in power, and the massacre would be rendered taboo' (Ma Jian, 2014).

Writing Tiananmen in the Age of Amnesia

Returning briefly to his afterword to *Stick Out Your Tongue*, Ma Jian recognizes the apparent futility this act of indignation has had on the political status quo in China, more generally:

In the eighteen years since *Stick Out Your Tongue* was first published, I have returned to China countless times. ... The Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 convinced me that I could never make China my permanent home. ... The government doesn't need to keep tabs on me any more, because by denying me a voice they have made me disappear (2006, pp. 88-89).

Here, Ma Jian suggests that the discord between the authoritarian narrative of the CPC and his own experience of the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 has displaced him from China as his 'home'. Similarly, Ma's use of 'permanent' (or its noun plural variant, 'permanency'), the meaning of which, in Chinese (*yongjiu*) can also act as a paronym indicating 'perpetual' or 'everlasting', suggests a writer who – despite being 'made to disappear' – is nevertheless metaphysically retained in China. This idea recalls 'Heidegger's understanding of being', whereby, 'the meaning of *being* itself changes according to history, governed by the destiny of how being appears through time' (Calcagno, 2016, p. 205, emphasis added). In this sense, as his body of work suggests, Ma Jian has perhaps consigned himself to the long game of Chinese politics within a system renowned for both its cyclical temporality and its desire for modernization with a deep concern for maintaining political order (MacFarquhar, 2004, p. 341). The current so-called 'revolution of rising expectations' (Shambaugh, 2016, p. 56) in response to China's extraordinary demographic transformations, more generally (exemplified, for example, by the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong), raises the question of whether or not the systematic political stagnation resulting from the CPC's

continued authoritarian approach will atrophy in subsequent decades: if so, perhaps the ghosts of Tiananmen might finally be able to return home to tell their story.

Referring to Tiananmen Square and its treatment in Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, Belinda Kong evokes the terminologies of 'history' and 'myth' in describing the novel's thinly veiled fictionalised account of the Tiananmen protests. Kong's referents are suggestive of the novel's impact on both the historical narrative of the national and international dialogue with the events of 4 June 1989 and the sustained propagation by the Chinese authorities of the claim that the Tiananmen Square massacre was merely 'a counter-revolutionary political incident' (Mei, 2013, p. 269). Further still, the CPC's continued censorship of June Fourth, 1989 in 2014 (twenty-five years after the event itself) was, as Shetty is quoted, harsher than in previous years, as [the Chinese authorities] persist with trying to wipe the events of 4 June from memory' (quoted in MacLeod, 2014). Also, at risk of being forgotten each June Fourth are the protests that took place in 341 cities across China in the spring of 1989, such as in Chengdu, where a mother of one of the protesters has spent the last thirty years attempting to uncover why her teenage son was beaten to death in police custody (Kuo, 2019).

Whilst the 'mythic' proportions of the Tiananmen Square massacre are often situated at the forefront of discussion around China in 1989, it is also the case that it signified a wider mass urban social movement that outstripped the everyday coercive capacity of the state to respond. The way in which Chinese writers address these contested terms within the authoritarian machinations of the Chinese government's censorship of 'important topics' is an issue which is at the heart of Chapter Two's analysis of Mo Yan's novel *Life and Death* and is one which also invariably demands cognisance in the later discussions of the writers presented in this thesis. Their works, collectively, I argue, seek to re-examine the 'official' narrative of 'history' and 'myth' in contemporary China.

In understanding the considerable role *Beijing Coma* plays in documenting the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, one becomes acutely aware of the novel's almost painstakingly wrought obsession with sequentially recording the sequence of events that were precipitated by the earlier student unrest of 1986-87 until its crescendo on June Fourth, 1989. So much so is Ma Jian's acute attention to historical detail that he is often considered by commentators of his writing as verging on 'obsessive', the consequence of a writer in exile who, according to Pankaj Mishra (2008), 'cares about only one society'. The fact that Ma Jian is, to this day, prohibited by the Chinese government from promoting his books or making any public statements (Loh, 2013, p. 380) is perhaps testament itself to the historical acuity of his writing.

Ma Jian's novel *Beijing Coma* addresses the issue of collective amnesia as he follows the thoughts of its narrator-protagonist Dai Wei lying unconscious and paralyzed after a bullet wound to his head during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Knight, 2014, p. 114). In the novel's opening pages, we see Dai Wei begin to regain consciousness. This act of awakening is symbolically similar to Ximen's Nao's response to his in-limbo spiritual state in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Dai Wei's narrative begins:

I'm lying on a hospital bed, just as my father did before he died. ... Am I beginning to remember things? I must be alive, then. Or perhaps I'm fading away, flitting, one last time, through the ruins of my past, No, I can't be dead. I can hear noises. Death is silent. (p. 2)

The idea of 'flitting ... through the ruins of [the] past' once again reminds us of Ximen Nao's journey through saṃsāra. However, where Mo Yan's protagonist's journey through his past leads to his spiritual enlightenment at the dawn of a new millennium, Dai Wei experiences no such trajectory within *Beijing Coma*. Even in moments throughout the text where Dai Wei seems capable of assigning spiritual meaning to his life 'on a hospital bed', the reader is

reminded of the physical limitations of Dai Wei's unconscious state: 'I'd separated myself from my body, or perhaps my body has separated itself from me. But then the bird arrived and dragged me back into my fleshy tomb' (p. 570).

If it can be suggested that Dai Wei's consciousness in his coma is controlled by the influence of external agents, it follows that Dai Wei's narrative here suggests a disengagement between his disassociated memory and the temporality of his physical existence. Indeed, the image of "the bird", a sparrow, is Ma Jian's symbolic representation of the freedom of the mind which recurs through the novel as both the pivot upon which Dai Wei's memory and his unconscious state alternates. It is also a metaphor (in his recollections of the events prior to being shot in the Square) for the violent military suppression of the student protesters. For example, Tian Yi, a fellow student and protester whom Dai Wei recalls nursing him throughout the hunger strikes in the square via the novel's use of flashback, warns Dai Wei in a moment of prophetic irony not to draw attention to himself: 'Remember, the bird that leaves the flock is always the first to be shot' (p. 315).

It is precisely his displacement from the fallout of the ensuing crackdown that permits Dai Wei to reflect on the events in the square. 'Time has lost all meaning for me', he observes: 'Even if I did ... wake up from this coma, the only real change would be that my horizontal body would become vertical again' (p. 404). For Dai Wei, the issue of lived experience and memory recurs throughout the text: he equitably describes memories as '[spiralling] around him' (p. 333), being 'as muddled and random as the contents of a rubbish bin' (p. 20), and '[flashing] by like the highlighted windows of a passing train' (p. 16).

If we take Parkin's (1987, p. 68) differentiation of the term 'amnesia' as that which can constitute either: 'anterograde amnesia, which refers to difficulty in acquiring new information after some trauma or illness, and retrograde amnesia, in which the patient cannot

remember things he or she knew prior to the precipitating illness or trauma', it becomes clear that Dai Wei, like Ximen Nao in Mo Yan's *Life and Death*, exists in a limbo state. He neither has difficulty in 'acquiring new information', (being perpetually self-conscious and aware of his comatose state), 'I think once more about how it might feel to wake up from this coma' (p. 456), nor does he entirely lose his memory 'prior to the precipitating illness or trauma'. However, as we have seen, the recollection of his memories prior to his 'trauma' are recalled with great psychological frustration.

The notion of amnesia permeates *Beijing Coma* as Dai Wei observes the 'change[s] taking place' (p. 570) across China. In its temporal detachment, Dai Wei's comatose mind is employed by Ma Jian as a symbolic reminder of resistance to the Chinese state and its ability to command mental passivity and conformity to what Loh (2013, p. 389) highlights as the state's definition of competent, responsible, and rational individuals. Later in the novel, Dai Wei envisages a future in which the Chinese authorities will possess the ability to biologically alter the memories of dissident elements:

Perhaps if I make it into the twenty-first century, scientists will be able to embed a microchip into my brain that will replace my wounded hippocampus. By then, the government will have created a Ministry of Memory which will produce silicon chips that mimic the pattern of the brain's nerve cells. Once a chip is inserted into my head, it will connect with my neurons, bypassing damaged tissue. (p. 427)

If we take Dai Wei's projection as a metonym for the Chinese state's ability to biopolitically control its population akin to the Orwellian concept of 'Big Brother' (Forrest, 2011, p. 118), his obsession with memory and recollection is similar to Ma Jian's own 'obsessiveness' in documenting the timeline of the events leading up to June Fourth, 1989. Like Dai Wei, who rails as much against his own potential loss of memory as the loss of the student movement,

in *Beijing Coma*, Ma Jian seems unwilling to resign the efforts of Tiananmen to ‘the dustbin of history’ (Marcus, 1995, p. 4). Indeed, as Belinda Kong (2012, p. x) observes, *Beijing Coma* appears to be ‘Ma’s attempt to preserve the aspirations of “the Tiananmen Generation”’. The novel’s preservation of historical memory thus connects once again to the theoretical framework established by Louisa Lim’s (2014) assessment of the CPC’s censorship apparatus and stands in direct opposition to the perpetuation of ‘national amnesia’ pursued by the CPC regime.

Critiquing the ‘Chinese Dream’

Ma Jian’s latest novel, *China Dream* (2018), first published in its English-language translation by Flora Drew, refocuses the author’s critique of the Chinese government through the novel’s critique of the CPC’s ‘Chinese Dream’ policy. At the time of writing, *China Dream* acts as the most contemporaneous example of literature produced by this thesis’ three authors and is worth highlighting here to assess how Ma Jian has redoubled his critique of the CPC in his recent writing.

In his preface to *China Dream*, which Ma Jian claims ‘is a political allegory of the country’s modern self’ (quoted in Ives, 2018), he decries ‘the false utopias that have enslaved and infantilised China since 1949’ (*China Dream*, p. x). These ‘false utopias’, a term which Ma Jian uses in reference to the ‘Chinese Dream’ of the novel’s title (a political vision of national rejuvenation promoted by Xi Jinping) have been promoted as a result of ‘Decades of indoctrination, propaganda, violence and untruths [that] have left the Chinese people so numb and confused, [that] they have lost the ability to tell fact from fiction’ (p. ix). Ma’s critique of ‘the Chinese Dream’ (*Zhongguo meng*) as a ‘false utopia’, and his subsequent conclusion of

its impact upon the Chinese people as having left them with the inability to ‘tell fact from fiction’, forms a particularly significant commentary on contemporary Chinese experience and how literature can respond to China’s current socio-political environment: as has already been illustrated earlier in his interview with Ives (2018), Ma Jian himself suggests that *China Dream* is a partial response to ‘the country’s modern self’. It is worth interrogating the terminology of behind Ma’s critique of the Chinese Dream (as an example of the ‘false utopias that have infantilised’ China) as well as considering the semantics of the term ‘Chinese Dream’ itself. This method of defining ‘false utopias’ and the ‘Chinese Dream’ should help us better understand how political vision and fictional imagination are frequently intertwined and yet often contested in contemporary Chinese literature. As the analysis I shall present reveals, political vision and fictional imagination are, in the case of China, not necessarily mutually exclusive; in this sense, fictional imagination frequently responds to China’s wider socio-political contexts while political vision regularly exhibits distinctly literary underpinnings.

Utopian Visions

In understanding what might be considered the ‘false utopia(s)’ of the Chinese Dream, it is necessary to briefly consider the vision of utopia provided in the early canon of Chinese literature. Drawing from his analysis of Fei Ming’s *Qiao* (1932), Wu Xiaodong (2016, p. 213) defines utopia as that which refers ‘to a fictitious space; the meaning of the word itself is “no-where”’. Wu describes how the spatial isolation offered by early utopian works gradually evolved into a time-based concept over the course of Western modernisation, thus ‘creating a time-based mourning and not [the] spatial nostalgia’ offered by earlier utopian fiction (2016, p. 214). However, citing Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (365-427) *Taohua Yuan Ji* (*Peach Blossom*

Spring),¹⁸ Wu notes that, unlike the characteristically secular utopias produced as a result of Renaissance secularism in Western cultures, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623), 'utopia in the Chinese tradition is void of time-based references' (2016, p. 214). In other words, the concept of time in the Chinese utopian tradition is secondary to the primacy of space; it is perhaps this focus on the spatial construct of the utopian imagination that scholars of utopian studies stress that non-Western cultures, such as China, have historically produced only paradises, rather than utopias (Chiang, 2009, p. 98).

Similarly, drawing from Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*, Mingdong Gu (2006, p. 59) shows us that the term *wutuobang* 乌托邦 ('utopia') came to fruition in China at the end of the Jin dynasty (265-420). Recalling Zhang Longxi's (2005, pp. 182-183) description of the 'ethereal utopia' of *Peach Blossom Spring*, commonly regarded as the most influential example of utopian fiction in Chinese history (Hightower, 1994, pp. 578-580; Tian, 2010, p. 221), Gu (2006, p. 59) reminds us that the term 'Peach Blossom Spring' itself subsequently became synonymous with the concept of utopia in Chinese literary discourse.

Peach Blossom Spring describes the discovery by a local fisherman of an isolated, self-sufficient and self-governed peach blossom grove. As Longxi (2007, p. 222) recounts, the grove is separated 'from the rest of the world by water, mountains and dense forests,' and is seemingly illustrative of the 'perfect social conditions that allows neither decline nor the need for improvement'. Upon further exploration of the peach blossom grove, however, the fisherman, who represents an element of connection between the utopian community of Peach Blossom Spring and the outside world, is employed by Tao Yuanming to highlight the discordant nature of Peach Blossom Spring's isolation from the rest of the world and the

¹⁸ Also translated and interchangeably referred to as: 'Source of the Peach Blossoms,' '(The Record of) the Peach Blossom,' or *The Peach Blossom Land* (Bokenkamp, 1986, p.65; Schafer, 1986, p.667).

reality of the present. Describing how the utopian society of Peach Blossom Spring came into being, its residents recount to the fisherman that:

their ancestors found this inaccessible place when they took their wives, children, and relatives in flight from the tyrannical rule of the Emperor of Qin, and since then they have never gone out. So they had been separated from people outside. They asked what dynasty it was now, and had no idea there had been Han, let alone Wei and Jin. (1979, p.165)

Written during the period of political disunity after the collapse of the 400-year-old Han dynasty we see the fictional imagination of Tao responding to the political vacuum that ensued during the age of tripartite conflict, commonly referred to as the period of the ‘Three Kingdoms’ (Beck, 1986, pp. 353-357). As Timothy Chan (2012, p. 1) outlines in *Considering the End*, ‘the political atmosphere ... in early medieval China seems to have been a cause of significant anxiety for intellectuals’, including Tao. What makes the space of Peach Blossom Spring significant however, akin to Wu Xiaodong’s interpretation of the spatial isolation of utopia, is that the residents of the peach blossom grove are isolated from the outside world and, as a result, face no interference from external political power.

As we have seen, this anxiety is reflected in the utopian community of Peach Blossom Spring, whose ancestors ‘took their wives, children, and relatives in flight’ in response to the ‘tyrannical rule of the Emperor of the Qin’. Returning to Chiang’s (2009, p. 98) earlier evocation of the differences between utopian studies in Western and non-Western cultures, the latter of which, scholars infer, have historically produced ‘paradises’, we can see that *Peach Blossom Spring* counters the characteristics of a ‘paradise’. Furthermore, Chiang’s distinction between ‘paradises’ and ‘utopias’ reinforces the socio-political context that *Peach Blossom Spring* was written in response to, namely: the political struggles of China’s Period

of Disunity (Chan, 2012, p. 2). It is this context, Chiang (2009) notes, which ultimately distinguishes paradises from utopias for, ‘unlike paradises, where individual happiness may be achieved independent of the constraints of human society’, as in *Peach Blossom Spring*, utopias are intrinsically connected to the wider socio-political contexts of reality:

in a utopia individual happiness is inextricably linked to its social context. Therefore, a utopia typically exists in this world and in this life; it is based on the reality of this world. While both utopias and paradises may be regarded as critiques of the status quo, utopias express or represent socio-political *solutions* while paradises direct our yearning for a better life to the beyond. (pp. 97-98, emphasis added)

In Western utopian studies, a similar interpretation of utopias is offered by Karl Mannheim, who highlights the necessity for utopias to respond to the wider socio-political contexts of the world. In his Introduction to *Ideology and Utopia*, Bryan S. Turner (1977, p. xxxix) summarises that Mannheim’s treatise on utopian commitment was itself produced as an intellectual response to ‘dictatorship and totalitarianism in politics’. For Mannheim, Turner claims, ‘utopia is shaped by the will for change and thus utopian thought is a significant force in historical change’.

As my analysis of the notion of ‘utopia’ has shown, two themes emerge which help us understand how the fictional imagination in contemporary Chinese literature responds to the wider socio-political vision of the CPC in twenty-first century China: first, as Chiang’s (2009) understanding of the differences between paradises and utopias reveals, utopias are based on the reality of the world and thus, in the context of Chinese literature, may be regarded as critiques of the existent socio-political conditions of contemporary China. Unlike paradises, however, utopias distinguish themselves in their expression or representation of socio-political solutions, whereas paradises speak more widely to our desire for a subjectively

better world beyond the reality of our current, and any realizable, situation. Secondly, Mannheim proposes that utopian thought is, in part, produced by the intellectual response to dictatorial and totalitarian politics and, therefore, utopias are influenced by the will for socio-political change and play a significant role in influencing wider historical change.

As has been suggested earlier in this chapter, the world of Ma Jian's *China Dream* lies somewhere between Chiang and Mannheim's definitions, complicated by the fact that the novel has been received by Western critics as a critique of the CPC's 'vision for China's development over the next decades' (Sørensen, 2015, p. 55) vis-à-vis the 'Chinese Dream.' Indeed, the novel itself offers little-to-no solution to what Ma Jian describes as 'the totalitarian society' of contemporary China.

Speaking at the Hong Kong International Literary Festival in November 2018, Ma Jian reinforced his views on the totalitarianism of the CPC regime, likening the Chinese government's propagation of the 'false utopias' of the Chinese Dream to George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, stating that 'the totalitarian society that George Orwell described ... [has] now been "completely and totally" realized in China' (quoted in Ives, 2018). As this chapter highlights, Ma Jian's position as a Chinese writer in exile has imbued his work with a more than explicitly critical approach to the authoritarianism of the CPC than is evident, for example, in the work of Mo Yan.

Furthermore, Cheng (2018) correlates Ma Jian's position as writer in exile to his critical approach and suggests that it is the CPC's increased rhetoric in promoting the 'Chinese Dream' that gives *China Dream*, and Ma Jian's wider corpus, a renewed sense of urgency and relevance under the authoritarianism of the Chinese government. In an early review of the novel, Cheng (2018) writes that *China Dream*: 'shoots an arrow at Xi Jinping's "China Dream" propaganda, creating a biting satire of totalitarianism that reveals what

happens to a nation when it is blinded by materialism and government by violence and lies.
... this dystopian novel is a portrait not of an imagined future, but of China today’.

Before turning our attention to the works of Yan Lianke in Chapter Four, it is worth briefly outlining the future vision of China projected by the ‘Chinese Dream’. This background will not only seek to highlight how Ma Jian’s has positioned himself as one of China’s most outspoken literary critics but also provides context for analysing Yan Lianke’s novel, *The Day the Sun Died* which has contentiously been read by Western critics as a critique of ‘Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream” of national greatness’ (McDowell, 2018).

The Chinese Dream and Narratives of National Rejuvenation

In contrast to the interpretation of utopia presented in this chapter, scholarly attention towards interpretations of the ‘Chinese Dream’ has become a more recent focus of sinologists’ attention, resulting, in part, from the neologism’s adoption by the President, General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Central Military Commission of China, Xi Jinping in 2012 (Hernández, 2017).¹⁹ The phrase ‘Chinese Dream’ itself was first publicly employed by Xi Jinping in his inaugural policy pronouncement as the new leader of China in 2013 to describe his underlying political strategy for ‘the great rejuvenation of the

¹⁹ See: ‘The Chinese Dream Infuses Socialism with Chinese Characteristics with New Energy,’ editorial, *Qiushi*, 6 May 2013; also ‘Potential of the Chinese Dream,’ *China Daily USA*, 26 March 2014, and numerous other articles on this topic available through the China Daily website, available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/Chinese-dream.html> (Accessed: 7 August 2019). Also, worth highlighting in relation to recent scholarly attention on the ‘Chinese Dream’, is the ‘Reading and Writing the Chinese Dream: A Collaborative Research, Reading and Translation Project’, initiated by Timothy Cheek, David Ownby and Joshua Fogel. Established in 2014, this five-year project reflects recent sinology’s attempt to engage with the public conversation on the Chinese Dream in order to ‘re-examine China’s past to uncover themes, practices, forgotten traditions and missed opportunities that might fill the void at the core of China’s current political/cultural identity and help to create China’s future.’ For specific information relating to the background to The Chinese Dream Project, see: <https://www.thechinastory.org/cot/reading-and-writing-the-chinese-dream-introducing-a-project/> and, for the website which functions as the core product of the project, see: <https://www.readingthechinadream.com>.

Chinese nation’ (Chai and Chai, 2013, p. 1). In ‘The Meaning of the Chinese Dream’, Chai and Chai (2013, p. 96) note that Xi Jinping’s use of the word ‘dream’ 梦 (*meng*) was particularly surprising as never before in the history of the PRC had a Chinese leader ‘used the term “dream” as a policy guideline’. The use of ‘dream’ in this context thus represented a significant narrative break from the Maoist Chinese version of communism of the twentieth century towards a strong future vision for China (Chi, 2018).

Western critics, however, such as Ian Johnson (2016) have been less optimistic regarding Xi Jinping’s employment of the term, considering it another ‘contribution to national sloganeering’, albeit one whose ‘idea [is] simple to grasp’. Similarly, David Bandurski (2013), suggests that the ‘Chinese Dream’ is yet another political catchphrase, or *tifa* 提法 (‘wording’), by which the CPC’s leaders have communicated their general policy ideas and used to imprint their leadership values.

Prior to Xi Jinping’s usage, the phrase had been used by journalists and scholars who more closely associated China’s aspirations in the twenty-first century to that of the American Dream, notably by Helen Wang whose book, *The Chinese Dream* (2010) characterises the term as a variant of the American dream now pursued by the vast population of China who aspire to live an American middle-class lifestyle. Chinese media also played on the ambiguity of the China Dream versus the American Dream, strengthening the consideration that the Chinese model can represent an alternative to American soft power (Shi, 2014) whilst reinforcing the centrality of the state in improving people’s lives, unlike the individualistic American version.

In a similar vein to the spectre of Mao Zedong, whose legacy looms large over the significant historic events represented within Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the context of Xi Jinping’s overarching ambition for China encapsulated by the ‘Chinese

Dream’ raises the question whether the ideology of the CPC will continue to exert its influence on literary expression in mainland China. If so, in an era of ever-increasing, extensive and sophisticated censorship in China under President Xi Jinping (Li, 2019), how can contemporary Chinese writers negotiate what Ma Jian has termed the ideological ‘false utopias’ of the Chinese Dream?

Aside from the CPC’s wider ambition to ‘strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics, ... and work tirelessly to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation’ (Xi, 2017, p. 1), it is also worth referring to Xi Jinping’s extensive report, delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, in which he specifically outlined the Chinese Dream’s vision for the future of literature and the arts in China. In section seven of his address, Xi outlines the future guidance for literature and the arts as envisaged under the scope of the Chinese Dream.

Retaining the narrative of national rejuvenation, Xi’s address highlights that ‘without full confidence in our culture, ... the Chinese nation will not be able to rejuvenate itself’ (2107, p. 36). The correlation between the narrative of national rejuvenation and its reliance on a ‘confident culture’ exhibits the most explicit connection between the state and cultural production seen in China since Mao Zedong’s ‘Talks at Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’ in 1942 and raises particular challenges for the future of literature under the authoritarian governance of the CPC. Arguably, the implications of these measures set out at the 19th National Congress of the CPC have yet to be fully realised in China and are complicated by émigré Chinese writers, such as Ma Jian, who publish their work outwith the official jurisdiction of the Chinese mainland.

One writer who has exhibited a more nuanced negotiation between his writing in China and increasing literary reception abroad is Yan Lianke.²⁰ The context of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream policy, when juxtaposed with Yan's corpus and, notably, the publication of his latest novel, *The Day the Sun Died* (as I introduce in the following chapter) can help us understand how contemporary Chinese writers can find a way to navigate the ideological restrictions contained within the Chinese Dream.

Critically, the development of a 'stronger cultural confidence', according to Xi Jinping, relies on an 'ideology [which should] determine the direction a culture should take and the path it should follow as it develops' (2017, p. 37). This ideological direction to engender a 'stronger cultural confidence' within China is further complicated by the context of a regime which deliberately edits, and erases history while being preoccupied with its longer imperial history. In *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (2003), Paul Cohen neatly summarises the Chinese regime's feeling of national humiliation and connects this to the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting: two concepts which have become paramount concerns of the CPC following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. In short, Cohen's correlates the CPC's focus on national humiliation with Xi Jinping's repeated emphasis of 'rejuvenation' (*fixing*), underscoring the CPC's narrative of China's future trajectory as a return to greatness and not a rise from nothing (Wang, 2013). As such, in seeking to overcome the injustices of history (Yoho, 2018), Xi has ideologically surpassed the ideology of Mao's Cultural Revolution: the aim of this, as Graham Allison (2017) reminds us, was an attempt to eradicate China's ancient past in favour of communism. In contrast to Mao, Xi Jinping has increasingly sought to portray 'the party as the inheritor and

²⁰ Following the Japanese translation of *Shouhuo*, *China Daily* reports that, at the end of 2014, Yan Lianke had broken all records of sales of Chinese writers' works, being reprinted four times in four months ("Yan Lianke", 2018). More recently, *Grove Atlantic* noted, at the end of 2018: 'Yan's international profile has never been higher – recent weeks have seen a major, in-depth profile at the *New Yorker*, a stunning interview with the *Guardian*, selection as *The Week's* Author of the Week, and no shortage of critical raves' ("Preparing", 2018).

successor' not to the 'disruptive mass campaigns' of the twentieth century which 'frequently divided the country's political elite in bitter conflict' (Kraus, 2012, p. 9), but 'to a 5,000-year-old Chinese empire brought low only by the marauding West' (Allison, 2017). Thus, the CPC evokes past humiliations at the hands of Japan and the West to 'create a sense of unity that had been fracturing, and to define a Chinese identity' through Xi's objective of the Chinese Dream, which is 'fundamentally at odds with ... modernity' (Allison, 2017). The context of the Chinese Dream is essential in not only recognising the future of China as envisaged by the ideological trajectory of the CPC, but also raises the question of how literature itself functions under an ideology which is fundamentally at odds with modernity.

Conclusion

The aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, which constituted the most fundamental political challenge to the authority of the CPC since it came to power (Sandby-Thomas, 2010, p. 55; Bonnin, 2010, p. 33), brought the twentieth century to a close upon the backdrop of decisive social and political events in China which 'had far-reaching implications for the rest of the world' (Lu, 2001, p. 2) and marked a sudden transition from literary modernity in China to what Shih (2014, p. 182) terms 'the post-Tiananmen [period]' of China's modern history. Characterised by the accelerated pace of rapid economic growth and marketisation of the Chinese economy, the 'post-Tiananmen' period marked a shift in intellectual attention towards the 'legitimacy on the basis of Marxism-Leninism' (Fewsmith, 2009, p. 9) of the CPC, whereby issues of 'declining social mores, pervasive official corruption, rising levels of inequality, and a heightened popular sensitivity to issues of national sovereignty and prestige' (Misra, 2003, p. 717) acquired an acute sense of urgency in

the years following the Tiananmen demonstrations and shattered what little belief in Marxism-Leninism was left in China.

For the CPC leadership, the correlation between these national and geopolitical transformations signified an unwelcome vindication of their concerns that extensive reform and unrestrained intellectual liberalisation would result in a radical revision of official doctrine, and eventually undermine the Party's normative authority. Most importantly, the 'post-Tiananmen' period positioned writers against the narrative posited by the CPC to reconsider the 'historical quality or authenticity' (Harré and Moghaddam, 2006, p. 95) of the past under an authoritarian regime already predisposed to employing the use of censorship as a means of preserving a state-sponsored record of history, particularly one such as the CPC who, as Green and Karolides (2009, p. 104) emphasise, in 'the unashamed propagandizing that followed the massacre in Tiananmen Square ... proved, [have] no scruples in rewriting history as and when required'.

When considering the authors used as case studies throughout this thesis, we can begin to see why Mo Yan and Ma Jian offer a polarised vantage point in understanding the contemporary literary environment in China. Whilst Mo Yan's fiction, which, I argue in contrast to his more vocal detractors, displays a critical interpretation of history which has effectively allowed his writing to explore the contested historical context of China's turbulent twentieth century, he nevertheless remains limited by his public profile as China's lauded Nobel laureate.

Turning on the other hand to Ma Jian, the visceral representation of politically sensitive events in Ma Jian's historical fiction has distinguished him as one of China's most outspoken literary critics, and the treatment of the pro-democracy movement that was cut off by the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Dreyer, 2015, p. 292) challenges the ideological direction of the current Chinese regime's ideological ability to enshrine a 'stronger cultural

confidence', as set out and established by the CPC's vision for the 'Chinese Dream'. Yet, Ma Jian's dystopian take on the CPC's 'Chinese Dream' ideology, illustrated by the publication of *China Dream*, seems to ironically indicate a rejuvenation of Ma Jian's own literary persona as a dissident Chinese writer who, from exile, is able to pursue a uniquely critical approach to his homeland through his writing.

If it can therefore be argued that Mo Yan and Ma Jian stand as literary opposites in their potential to respond to issues facing contemporary Chinese writers, it also remains the case that their respective works offer a singular response to the new ideological direction for literature envisaged by the CPC. In the following chapter, I draw attention to the historical fiction of Yan Lianke, a writer who, I suggest, acts as an intermediary figure and encapsulates elements of Mo Yan's position as a writer based in China, but whose work also exhibits a critical interpretation of China's twentieth century which distinguishes him, alongside Ma Jian, as one of China's most controversial novelists of the twenty-first century.

Chapter Four: Imagined Spaces of Resistance in Yan Lianke's Fiction

Introduction

When Yan Lianke's *Rixi* (2015) was published in English as *The Day the Sun Died* in July 2018, it evoked a reception within English-speaking literary circles unlike any of his recent publications to date. Yan, a prolific writer in his native Chinese, has published several novels over the course of the last decade, notably: *Dingzhuang Meng* (*Dream of Ding Village*, 2006), *Sishu* (*The Four Books*, 2011) and *Zhalie Zhi* (*The Explosion Chronicles*, 2013). With the exception of *Dream of Ding Village* (translated by Cindy Carter), all been translated into English by Carlos Rojas. Yet none of Yan's previous translations into English has been received with the seemingly overnight acclaim with which *The Day the Sun Died* was met.

An early review of *The Day the Sun Died* by the *Economist* was among the first to connect the novel's central motif of a mass somnambulism experienced by the people of Gaotian village – a fictionalised village in modern-day central China, based loosely on Yan's ancestral home of Henan Province²¹ – to Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream'. The review claimed: 'Mr Yan wrote "The Day the Sun Died" soon after China's leader Xi Jinping had sloganised the idea of the "Chinese Dream"' ("Yan", 2018). The tenuous political analogy implied between Yan Lianke's writing of the novel and Xi Jinping's idea of the 'Chinese Dream' gathered increasing momentum in subsequent reviews, with Sean Hewitt (2018) of *The Irish Times* erroneously referring to Carlos Rojas' introduction to *The Day the Sun Died* as

²¹ The novel's young narrator-protagonist, Li Niannian describes Gaotian village as 'located in the center of China, and the center of the world' ('Preface'): an epithet commonly attributed to Henan Province, considered to be 'the birthplace of the Chinese nationality and the cradle of Chinese civilization' (Wang, 2016, p.23; Zhang, 2005, p.43).

suggestive of the novel's political 'critique of Chinese president Xi Jinping's slogan of the Chinese dream'.

The immediate correlation made in the West between the 'mass dreamwalking' experience by Gaotian village within *The Day the Sun Died* and the wider political context of the 'Chinese Dream' seems to reflect Joel Kohen's (2018) review of the novel and suggestion that a more nuanced reading of Chinese literature is required by Western audiences. Certainly, whilst in his introduction Rojas (2017, p. vii) alludes to 'marginalized figures' in contemporary China and his hope that *The Day the Sun Died* will 'draw attention to actual communities and social phenomena that remain hidden in the shadows of contemporary China's rapid growth', nowhere does he connect the novel's metaphor of somnambulism to the idea of the 'Chinese Dream', an interpretation of the text which Yan himself has similarly rejected.

Giving an interview in the *Guardian* whilst promoting the British edition of the novel, Yan responded to readings of *The Day the Sun Died* as a social and political critique of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese dream' noting that:

When I first read some of the comments by critics here I was really surprised, because that hadn't been particularly my original intention. I wanted merely, through writing about sleepwalking, to reflect a lot of basic and fundamental truths about the human heart. A direct connection to the Chinese dream was not what I intended at all.

(McDowell, 2018)

Whilst it is necessary to take precautions in adhering to an author's interpretation of their own work, Yan is illustrative of a writer who has had considerable experience of falling foul of China's censors. However, as contemporary Chinese critics, artists, and Yan himself frequently comments, the most ubiquitous form of censorship in China today is self-censorship, and Yan openly admits to self-censoring his earlier novels in an effort to have

them published in mainland China. Describing his publication of *Lenin's Kisses*, for example, he reflects: 'I should have done much better with Lenin's Kisses. But I spent too much time on self-censoring. I wanted my book to be published' (quoted in Wong, 2016).

By contrast with Ma Jian who has frequently used his position as a writer in exile to not only criticise the 'barbaric regime' of the CPC (Ma Jian, 2014), but also to take aim at mainland 'writers like Mo Yan' who, he claims, adhere to the 'contract in China not to write about politics' (Ma Jian, 2012), Yan Lianke has developed a more nuanced approach in his relationship with China's censors. Indeed, as Yan's own career trajectory ironically serves to illustrate, the state's banning of books has the unintended effect of bestowing targeted authors with prestige and legitimacy in China's literary field whilst bolstering their visibility both domestically and abroad. The censure of Yan's novel *Xia riluo* (*Summer Sunset*, 2010), he suggests, was relaxed due to the positive attention the censorship of the novel received outwith China (*Xi Riluo*, 2010, p. 185). And yet, despite his own admissions of self-censorship, Yan maintains a critical view on the state's intervention in China's literary field: mainland authors who have never been banned, he claims, are held in suspicion by their peers. Conversely, he also exhibits suspicion towards writers who pursue censorship as a mark of distinction (2013). Yan's reflections therefore yield a key insight on 'the great binary' (Brown, 2014, p. 206) of censorship in contemporary China: overt demonstrations of state power frequently fail to suppress the intended target, sometimes having directly the opposite outcome.

Nevertheless, Yan's awareness of the issues of censorship in China concerning the political content of his novels remain closely interrelated. Describing his ability to 'break free of the censors' whilst writing *The Four Books*, for example, Yan claimed: 'I no longer think about [censorship]. I wrote *The Four Books* exactly how I wanted it to be. Whether it could be published [in the mainland] did not concern me when I wrote it' (quoted in Wong, 2016).

However, when asked by Chenxin Jiang (following the publication of *The Four Books* in Chinese) if he still had plans to write about Tiananmen, a point in China's modern history which many Western readers of Yan's fiction have hoped to see him address, he responded that: 'Given that *Four Books* was impossible to publish, writing about June 4th would only make my work even more misunderstood. ... If I write about June 4th now, people will say I wrote about it to give Western readers what they want' (quoted in Jiang, 2012).

Reflecting on the response of his Western readership, Yan's comments appear to preemptively address his aforementioned response to the reading of *The Day the Sun Died* as a critique of the 'Chinese Dream' ideology. Launching the U.K. publication of the book at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2018, he reiterated during his presentation that the interpretation of his novels as relating exclusively to critiques of China's political environment have rendered any other readings of his novels inert and has thus created a 'certain misinterpretation' of *The Day the Sun Died* that he 'doesn't like' (i.e., the *Guardian* interview, above). My impression at that session was that for Yan, further exploration of *The Day the Sun Died* appeared inalienably connected to his interviewer and audience's interpretation of the novel exclusively as a response to the Chinese Dream.

In an attempt to move the direction of questioning from his novel's seemingly inescapable correlation to the Chinese Dream, I took the opportunity in the general questions segment of his presentation to press Yan on the role he felt fiction plays in contemporary China by asking what literature can achieve which other forms of engaging with the complexities of China cannot. Ironically, his response referred explicitly to the notorious correlation between the state and literature in China which all preceding interpretations of *The Day the Sun Died* have previously alluded to. Afterwards, in discussion with Yan, who was happy for our discussion to be quoted in this thesis, he clarified that, in his experience: 'Every leader seems to think there's a role that literature should play, and this is one of the

most damaging things you can do to literature: there shouldn't be a role. Writers should be artists first, and not consider the role.'²²

However, the combination of political authority and artistic control developed by the CPC has established a contemporary system of literary control in which writers like Yan Lianke, contrary to his suggestions otherwise, do in fact play a critical role in defining the aesthetic trajectory of Chinese literature under an authoritarian regime.

In his thesis, "Writing with Care: Yan Lianke and the Biopolitics of Modern Chinese Censorship", Chambers (2015, p. v) approaches this dilemma from the 'biopolitical' perspective of Yan's work in which he argues that the Communist Party has established institutions which 'completely fold life into politics' and thus 'top-down techniques like censorship have reemerged in the bottom-up phenomenon of internalized censoring'. Compellingly, Chambers argues that the content of Yan's novels, which he interprets as restaging historical events in order to narrate confrontations between writers and institutions of power, is reflective in what he defines as Yan's 'literary care' in his writing. Chambers convincingly concludes that Yan never neglects the relationship between life and politics but maintains that one is not reducible to the other. In so doing, Yan's novels show us how writers in China can:

engage with political pragmatics so that [they] can better manipulate them, crafting out a way to care for [themselves] and others that transcends the violence of their exclusionary logic. This is certainly a decisive victory that Yan Lianke has won against the censors, gaining an international readership for his novels that has only served to place increased pressure on the authorities censoring him domestically.

(Chambers, 2015, p. 101)

²² Whilst Yan presented his discussion of the novel in Chinese, translated by Esther Tyldesley (Yan, by his own admission, 'can't speak a word of English'), the translation into English of my question during the general questions segment and Yan's response in discussion are given as my own.

One thread which is less convincing in Chambers' study, however, is his analysis of the literary techniques which Yan employs in his novels which he suggests are solely preoccupied with Yan's 'literary care' in the face of internalised censorship. As my analysis of Yan's recent fiction in this chapter will illustrate, instances in which characters are shown by Chambers to 'disregard society's underlying disciplinary logic' (p. 99) do so, not solely as a result of Yan's preoccupation with self-censorship, but in an attempt to create 'thresholds' within his recent fiction that Yan employs as spaces of resistance against the restraints of the CPC's censorship. In this sense, as this chapter will show, Yan's work differs from the work of Mo Yan and Ma Jian because his novels exhibit a new direction in Chinese literature by which Chinese writers can use the constructs of metafiction as a tool in order to circumvent the censorship mechanisms existent within China

Heterotopias as Spaces of Literary Resistance

This autonomous sphere of artistic expression refers to Wu Xiaodong's definition of utopias provided in the previous chapter as 'fictitious space[s]' which (as we have seen with reference to Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*) are significant in inscribing an intellectual response to dictatorship and totalitarian politics (Turner, 1997, p. xxxix). Yet, while I read Yan's corpus as an intellectual response to the authoritarianism of the CPC, his novels I would argue are not characteristically utopian in the sense that they do not conjure sites with no real space but are instead exclusively located in and related to the socio-political environment of China. Similarly, Yan does not present society itself in a perfected form (Foucault, 1986, p. 24), but rather his fiction presents an unreal, or imagined, ontological space in which night replaces day, dreams are replaced by nightmares and even fiction is contrasted with reality itself. These imagined spaces are illustrative of what Foucault (1986,

p. 24) defines as ‘heterotopias’, or sites that exhibit ‘the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to ... invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect’. Naturally, the differentiation of ‘difference’ within heterotopias is crucial to Foucault’s idea and it is in this area that scholars indicate his concept is at its weakest; for Hetherington (1997, p. 7), for example, Foucault neglects to distinguish precisely how the spatial difference of heterotopias should be determined and thus it could be argued that analysing Yan’s novels using Foucault’s concept, which can include theatres, gardens and carpets, is too broad to be purposeful.

In their book *Heterotopia and the City*, Dehaene and De Cauter (2008) attempt to navigate the multitudinous examples provided by Foucault by offering three frameworks which synthesise heterotopic places, grouping them as: the anthropological; the temporal; and the imaginary (i.e., illusionary). Were this study to analyse the anthropological and temporal issues within Yan’s literature, it would generate questions far beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, by analysing his fiction within the scope of Dehaene and De Cauter’s third framework (i.e., the imaginary: an analogous space most predisposed to literary analysis), I look to illustrate how the imaginary heterotopias within Yan’s fiction can be viewed as literary spaces that oppose to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. Yan’s writing, I argue, thus provides a literary space in which the negotiation of China’s historical and socio-political contexts can be played out and reinterpreted, acting as a space of resistance under the literary restraints of the CPC’s authoritarian governance. This concept is expanded by Davis (2010, p. 663), who points out that Foucauldian thought often correlates heterotopias with “spaces of ‘resistance’ ... in the sense that [heterotopias] are meant to be liminal and therefore spaces [from which] to challenge and question’ dominant political forces.

Recent studies of Yan Lianke’s work have focused not on heterotopias, but instead on either utopian, dystopian or biopolitical interpretations of his novels. It is perhaps partly

owing to these polarised readings of his novels that Yan has expressed frustration about Western readers' response to *The Day the Sun Died* and, while it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully interrogate the cultural construction of China through Chinese literature in English translation, it is worth remembering that the essentialist characterisation of China in the West is ubiquitously constructed as a dystopia arising from the systematicity with which China is discursively constituted through myriad forms of media, of which literary translations are a part (Lee, 2015, p. 255).

By analysing Yan's fiction using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, I hope to not only move interpretations of his novels away from polarised readings of utopias and/or dystopias, but also to emphasise how his work illustrates different spaces which challenge and disturb other places around them (Sohn, 2008, p. 44) and in doing so, show how heterotopic spaces of resistance in contemporary Chinese literature offer ways of navigating the CPC's ideological vision for China's future in the twenty-first century.

Awakening into a State of Historical Awareness

In a *Time* op-ed comparing the Chinese Dream to the American Dream, Wasserstrom (2015) notes that 'dreams are often formed in association to nightmares' and it is precisely within this juxtaposition that Yan Lianke's novel, *The Day the Sun Died*, takes place. Set over the course of one night in the Balou mountains of Gaotian village, the novel is narrated from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy Li Niannian who comes to the realisation that Gaotian's residents have succumb to a 'mass somnambulism' (2017, p. 259) as they carry on with their daily lives after the sun has gone down.

As Rojas (2017, p. iii) recalls in his Introduction to the novel, the oneiric metaphors equating history with sleep and dreams are evoked by Joyce and Lu Xun, two of the twentieth

century's leading modernist authors whose works sought to '*awaken from* the nightmare that is history' (i.e., Joyce, emphasis added) or conversely, in the case of Lu Xun, '*awake into* a state of historical awareness' (Rojas, 2017, p. iii, emphasis in original English translation). Drawing from this modernist literary tradition, I seek to illustrate how the metaphor of Gaotian's seemingly 'endless' (Yan, 2017, p. 261) night is in fact used by Yan to draw together Joyce and Lu Xun's concerns; in other words, to combine their concerns more succinctly, we can say that *The Day the Sun Died* is a novel in which Yan calls upon his readers to *awaken from* the nightmare of history *into* a state of historical awareness.

One of the metaphors which expresses how Yan's characters in the novel 'awaken' from the nightmare of history is ostensibly simple: Gaotian's residents awaken from their 'somniaambulistic state' (2017, p. 181) following the intervention of Li Niannian, his father Li Tianbao, and the town's resident author (one 'Yan Lianke') as the night is ultimately overcome and the 'sky ... and everything under heaven [is] illuminated' (2017, p. 324) allowing the villagers of Gaotian to '[return] to the new day' (p. 327) at the novel's conclusion. Yet while this metaphor of the sun rising (thus awakening Gaotian's residents in the process of transforming night into day) constitutes the overarching plot of the novel it is, as this chapter will show, intrinsically related to an ancillary plot relating to Li Niannian's family's storage of corpse oil: a thread throughout the text which appears, in either oversight or deliberate intent, to have been largely overlooked despite its significant role at the novel's climax.

Niannian's proximity to death is established early in the novel, in both literal and more nuanced configurations. His parents, owners of the 'New World funerary shop' make a living designing 'bamboo frames and ... papercuts' (2017, p. 14), while his uncle is the director in charge of Gaotian's crematorium: a place 'devoted to cremating human corpses, and in this respect ... marked a threshold through which people passed into another world'

(2017, p. 38). Niannian remarks upon similar thresholds throughout the novel, using similar markers of physical and temporal space to describe Gaotian's mass somnambulism: 'When people started dreamwalking', he observes, 'they entered a different world' (2017, p. 127). Most strikingly, Niannian's observation that his uncle's crematorium is a threshold by which people pass into another world is directly mirrored in Foucault's second principle of heterotopias in which he claims that 'a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another' (2017, p. 25).

For Foucault (1986, p. 25), the cemetery is illustrative of this second principle of heterotopia as 'it is a space that is ... connected with all the sites of the citystate or society or village ... since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery'. Gaotian's crematorium functions precisely as Foucault's second principle of heterotopia outlines and, as Niannian discovers: 'Originally, it was a cemetery—a cemetery where thousands or even tens of thousands of corpses were buried. Thousands, tens of thousands, an entire world of corpses—were all brought here in hearses, only to be reduced to ashes and taken away in urns' (2017, p. 76, emphasis in original English translation).

The correlation between the 'threshold' space of Gaotian's crematorium and Foucault's concept of heterotopia returns to Davis' (2010) idea of how heterotopic spaces challenge and disturb other places around them and fundamentally speaks to the novel's transcendence of 'the nightmare that is history' through the metaphor of Gaotian's collective 'dreamwalking' and subsequent (re-)awakening. The novel is also illustrative of a considered attempt by Yan Lianke to determine the function of literature as a heterotopic space within society, an attempt which rejects the 'precise and determined function' of literature envisaged by CPC. This interpretation of *The Day the Sun Died* rejects a reading of the novel as a

‘dystopian’ response to the CPC and thus inscribes a new approach by which we can consider Yan’s earlier novels. Yet the problem of waking ‘into a state of historical awareness’ remains which, I will argue, Yan addresses by tying together the overarching and ancillary plots in the novel’s dénouement.

As Niannian navigates the ‘mass somnambulation’ of Gaotian village, chaos ensues. The village’s ‘dreamwalking’ residents revert to a feudal state presided over by the military governor Li Chuang who decrees the killing of anyone who is not from Gaotian (2017, p. 280) under the newly established ‘Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of ... King Chuang’ (p. 278). Consequently, as the death toll rises over the course of the night, Niannian observes how his family (whose primary trade is in funerary arrangements for the dead) struggle to meet the demand for funerary goods: ‘I turned to look, and saw that the funerary arrangements, which had been piled up as high as a mountain, were all gone’ (2017, p. 16). Niannian’s uncle, taking advantage of the rising death toll and unforeseen upturn in business, enforces the banning of burials and mandates cremation, thus producing the vast quantities of corpse oil which he sells to Niannian’s father who stores them in a nearby cave: ‘Barrel upon barrel of corpse oil was stored there, as though it were a village about the hold a ten-thousand person meeting. ... There was barrel after barrel, and if all the oil had been poured out, it would be enough to form a river, a lake, or even a vast ocean’ (p. 89).²³

²³ Kidd suggests that Niannian’s uncle’s ‘sudden love affair with capitalism’ places the novel within the context of ‘Deng Xiaoping’s aspiration to make China gloriously rich’ however, in a noteworthy case of life imitating art, in July 2018 (the same month in which *The Day the Sun Died* was published in English), authorities in southeast Jiangxi province authorised a ‘zero burial’ policy, effectively banning people from burying their dead with the aim to make cremation to sole approved method of disposing of people’s remains (Lao). See: ‘Bleak reality confronts the Chinese dream in Yan Lianke’s gruesome, gripping novel, *The Day the Sun Died*’, *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, available at: <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/books/article/2157656/bleak-reality-confronts-chinese-dream-yan-liankes> (Accessed: 10 January 2019), and Mimi Lau (2018), ‘Coffins smashed, seized, exhumed in China as province bans burials to save land’ *South China Morning Post*, 31 July. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2157531/coffins-smashed-seized-exhumed-china-province-bans-burials-save> (Accessed: 20 January 2019).

The lake of corpse oil prophetically imagined by Niannian comes to dramatic fruition at the novel's climax whereby his father immolates himself with the help of 'Yan Lianke' by setting the lake on fire to 'reflect ... the sun at dawn' (2017, p. 323), restoring the day and thus finalising the overarching plot of the novel. Li Tianbao's sacrifice not only responds to the awakening from the nightmare of Gaotian's somnambulation but is followed by a narrative postface which I suggest speaks once more to Foucault's concept of heterotopia and is strategically placed by Yan Lianke at the end of the novel to call upon the reader to awaken into a state of historical awareness.

Returning one final time to his second principle of the heterotopia of the cemetery, Foucault (1986, p. 25) notes that 'from the moment when people are no longer sure that they have a soul or that the body will regain life, it is perhaps necessary to give much more attention to the dead body, which is ultimately the only trace of our existence in the world and in language'. In his postface to *The Day the Sun Died*, Yan contrasts the different local and national 'traces of existence' following Gaotian's mass 'dreamwalking' and the eventual rising of the sun. Referring to the numbers of the dead, for example, Niannian recounts thirty-six of the 539 'people [who] died that night' (2017, p. 329) which is juxtaposed by the 'county, city, and provincial ... announcement, stating that in Henan Province there had been only a small number of locations where dreamwalkers had managed to create a disturbance' (p. 333).

This juxtaposition highlights the contrast between individual remembrance and state censorship in China whereby local devastation is negated by a narrative posited by the state and thus the dead (i.e., 'the only trace of our existence in the world') can be controlled by political factors outwith individual control. Niannian and his mother's remembrance of Li Tianbao also highlights the importance of historical awareness as Gaotian village gradually reverts to its usual status quo after the sun has risen: 'We ... placed Father's soil and ashes in

a room in our shop, assuming that in the future, whenever townspeople saw us and saw Father's ashes, they would feel grateful ... and would greet us with a smile. This, however, turned out not to be the case' (2017, p. 339).

Had Yan Lianke ended the novel at this concluding juncture, it could be argued that *The Day the Sun Died* could in fact be categorised as a 'dystopian' novel as the combination of the Li family's loss and the erasure of Gaotian's 'nightmare' (p. 292) exhibits elements of dystopian literature which Newman (1993, p. 169) categorises as 'the unhappiness of the characters portrayed; suspicion of sources of control of behaviour outside the individual; [and] suspicion of behavioural methods of governance'. However, a final scene in which the fictional version of Yan Lianke arrives at Niannian's home to 'gaze at [his] father's funeral portrait' (2017, p. 340) provides the most compelling case for *The Day the Sun Died* to be read as a heterotopic response to the wider context of contemporary China.

In this closing sequence, the fictional Yan Lianke places 'an enormous pile' of his own books next to the portrait of Niannian's father and, mirroring Li Tianbao's self-immolation, sets them alight before saying: "If I don't succeed in writing the book your father asked me to write—a book that would function as a warm stove in winter and a cool electric fan in summer—then I won't ever return to this town" (p. 340). Alluding to Niannian's appeal at the beginning of the novel to 'permit [Yan Lianke] to keep writing and keep living [and] to finish writing his *Night of the People* ... so that he may then include my family in his narrative' (p.8),²⁴ the fictional Yan Lianke has seemingly thus succeeded in writing his book, which is materially manifested for the reader as the 'real' Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died*.

²⁴ References to the 'real' Yan Lianke's novels within *The Day the Sun Died* are all rendered as fictionalised amalgamations of his previous works (or otherwise deliberately misquoted): for example, 'Kissing Lenin's Years' functions as an amalgamation of *Lenin's Kisses* and *The Years, Months, Days*, while 'The Dead Books' (p. 340) plays off *The Four Books*' homophonous association between the number four (si) and the Chinese word for 'death' (si).

It is this revelation which situates the novel specifically within the framework of a heterotopia in the sense that Yan's literary imagination (i.e., the fictionalised account contained within the novel) provides an imagined space which reflects the socio-political constructs of contemporary China but is revealed to the reader to be an imaginary construct from which they must awake. Comparable to the fictional awakening of Gaotian's residents, *The Day the Sun Died* thus calls the reader to awaken into a state of historical awareness that challenges us to rethink the unwritten 'traces of existence' which are otherwise narrated by the authoritarian institutions of state power in China. At the end of the novel, Niannian makes the observation:

The odd thing was that no one was speaking about the present. No one wanted the present. ... This great war had erupted over the future and the past. As for the present of this night of this month of this year, it either had been completely forgotten, or had been transformed into a nightmare. (2017, pp. 291-292)

Unlike his other novels, in which he restages historical events in order to narrate confrontations between writers and the state, Yan Lianke's call for a state of historical awakening in the conclusion to *The Day the Sun Died* seems to suggest a pragmatic directional change for contemporary Chinese writers in the face of China's seemingly insurmountable political reality.

The Explosion Chronicles: A Paratextual Prototype

If *The Day the Sun Died* is illustrative of Yan Lianke's call for a state of historical awakening and thus embodies not only a change of direction in his work, but also a directional change for contemporary Chinese writers in China, an earlier prototype for this novel can be seen in *The Explosion Chronicles*, Yan's first widely recognised literary achievement which also

marks his definitive professional break with the state propaganda apparatus (Chambers, 2015, p. 8).

In *The Explosion Chronicles*, Yan explores the traumas that underlie contemporary China's economic development: the process by which China's political leaders attempted to restore the legitimacy of the Party and political system following the trauma of the Great Leap that resulted in man-made famines, the death of tens of millions, and later the disturbances of the Cultural Revolution. Comprised as a series of historical chronicles, the novel surveys more than a thousand years of 'Explosion's explosive expansion' (p. 162) but notably centres its attention in the post-1949 era, particularly in the post-Mao period.

In *The Explosion Chronicles*, the titular community of *Zhalie* (Explosion) capitalizes on this opportunity as it metastasizes from a small village located in the Balou Mountain region of Henan province – the same region in which *The Day the Sun Died* is set and 'in which Yan has set many of his other fictional works' (Rojas, 2017, p. vii) – to a county, a city, and finally a provincial-level megapolis.

Recounting the fictionalised chronology of Explosion's rapid expansion, Yan symbolically transforms the exhaustion, pain and trauma that underlies contemporary China's economic development by showing its effect on the community of Explosion through the novel's unfolding of Explosion's swift expansion from a small village to a provincial-level megapolis. The chronicle that the (fictional) Yan weaves deviates from Explosion's factual history, inventing a parallel narrative in which Explosion's unchecked development leads to the swift and absurd promotion of Kong Mingliang from village chief to town mayor, to county mayor, and city mayor (Cao, 2016, p. 5) before Explosion's 'uneven development' (p. 7) is finally and fatally extinguished by an ill-fated war against the United States. This conflict leaves Kong Mingliang dead (the result of an assassination by his younger brother,

Kong Mingyao) and Explosion itself reduced to ‘a virtual ghost town’ (pp. 442-43) by the embedded novel’s conclusion.

In an early exposition of the Kong family, on whom ‘the subject of the spectacular *Explosion Chronicles*’ centres its focus, Yan Lianke personifies this pain through Kong Minghui (the second younger brother of Kong Mingliang), who secures ‘a job in town, and specifically was in charge of overseeing the town’s birthrate and its new households. [Minghui] said that signing the daily reports on Explosion’s population growth was so exhausting that his wrist was constantly in pain’ (p. 163). The underlying trauma of Explosion’s development, personified by Minghui’s physical exhaustion in maintaining the town’s records, not only symbolises the individual pain caused by the economic expansion of Explosion but also emphasises two key concerns of the text: firstly, the novel’s (and, as I will argue forthwith, Yan’s) painstaking effort to document the vast social-political and economic transformation which took place in the post-Mao period, and; secondly, the juxtaposition of the fictionalised Explosion’s ascent in contrast to the reality of the PRC.

By setting the novel against the backdrop of the post-Mao period, Yan explicitly correlates the development and fate of Explosion to the People’s Republic, more widely: ‘After the founding of China in 1949, the history of Explosion Village replicated in miniature the pain and prosperity undergone by the nation itself’ (p. 8). Thus, the development of Explosion functions as a literary microcosm of the PRC’s development within what Foster (1995, p. 75) defines as the function of microcosms as ‘the need to understand a complex social situation’ which underlies:

the way in which the “fictional world” is a microcosm of reality in the sense of a documentary miniature. ... and no matter to what degree the writer follows an imperative to strive for a sense of the vastness and social fabric within it, the narrative

can never be more than a coded map of the actual reality of social experience and the historical dynamic.

Therefore, by making the fictional growth of Explosion parallel to China's own economic development and political reforms, the novel symbolically aligns the projected futures of both Explosion and the PRC. Whilst this imbues the novel with the narrative ability to reflect upon and thus examine the underlying traumas of the post-Mao period, the eventual collapse of Explosion functions as a fictionalised account of what Rong Cai (2014, p. 125) terms the 'Frankenstein's monster' of China's twentieth century whereby Cai suggests that the social conditions that had given rise to the belligerence of Mao's Communist ideology may have been removed after his death, but have nevertheless remained a central concern for contemporary Chinese writers and are thus symbolically transformed into Explosion and played out by the conclusion of Yan's chronicles. In this sense, by reinforcing 'the glory and trauma [Explosion] shared with the People's Republic' (Yan Lianke, 2017, p. 9), *The Explosion Chronicles*' narrative trajectory of Explosion's rise and fall is distinctive, not singularly because Explosion serves as an allegorical depiction of China's urbanisation, but rather for Yan's achievement in opening up an imaginary space that exposes the horror within the process of the mass social, political and economic development of China's twentieth century.

Structurally, *The Explosion Chronicles* exhibits the same literary devices of author surrogate and embedding which Yan employs in *The Day the Sun Died*. According to Nelles (2010, p. 134), 'The most widely accepted use of the term "embedding" in the context of narrative theory is to designate the literary device of the "story within a story", the structure by which a character in a narrative text becomes the narrator of a second narrative text framed by the first one'. Consequently, *The Explosion Chronicles* is again a novel within a novel which recounts the transformation of Explosion from a small town to an international

city, as recorded by a novelist under government commission, one ‘Yan Lianke’. The inclusion of this fictionalised Yan Lianke, a prototype for the version of the author who appears in *The Day the Sun Died*, reminds us of Jukka Mikkonen’s (2013, p. 71) definition of ‘author surrogate’ whereby an author may include a character within their fiction ‘who represents the beliefs, views, and morality of the author who is often the main character and/or narrator of the work’. Yet, as Greaney articulates, an obvious theoretical challenge to Mikkonen’s definition of author surrogate has been enshrined by Roland Barthes’s 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”.

Greaney (2006, p. 61) summarises Barthes’s critique in which Greaney concludes that ‘the act of reading in an appeal to the author’s life, beliefs or intentions is simply a way of bypassing the complexities of textuality; [...] For this reason the author – in the sense of the God-like figure who precedes, produces, controls and limits textual meaning – has become *persona non grata* in post-Barthesian criticism’ (emphasis in original). Whilst the notion of the ‘death of the author’, echoed vigorously throughout the literary world, including China,²⁵ Barthes neither foresaw the subsequent development of the self-conscious, postmodern ‘author novel,’ in which “‘the story of an author ... is told again and again in postmodern texts’” (quoted in Greaney, 2006, p. 59), nor did Barthes anticipate the relevance of the ‘death of the author’ within the context of China to which I argue *The Explosion Chronicles*, more broadly, attempts to respond.

Indeed, the context of China was to become the locus of Barthes’s *Travels in China* (2012).²⁶ Published posthumously, and without the author having given prior permission,

²⁵ The use of the author surrogate in modern Chinese literature is considerably evident, for example, in the fiction of the May Fourth Period. See, for example: Christopher T. Keaveney (2004), ‘Reading Yu Dafu’s ‘Caishiji’ as *Shishōsetsu*,’ *The Subversive Self in Modern Chinese Literature: The Creation Society’s Reinvention of the Japanese Shishōsetsu*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 74-88; and Michael Egan (1977), ‘Yu Dafu and the Transition to Modern Chinese Literature’, *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, edited by Merle Goldman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 309-324.

²⁶ Barthes (2012), *Travels in China*, edited by Anne Herschberg Pierrot, translated by Andrew Brown. Cambridge: Polity.

from '[his] notebooks, or "writer's diaries" that he kept during [his] three-week visit to China' (Stafford, 2016, p. 289), *Travels in China* reflects Barthes's 'searching questions about the *true nature* of China in 1974' (p. 292, emphasis added) during and after his trip to China with the French avant-garde literary magazine *Tel Quel* in April 1974.

This 'semi-text', as Stafford illustrates in his analysis of the author's diaries, traces Barthes's uneasy resistance to Maoist propaganda and further highlights the juxtaposition between state-sponsored artifice and 'the true social realities', within the indeterminate boundaries of which many Chinese writers, including those discussed throughout this thesis, situate their work. 'The rub for Barthes, as the diaries go on', Stafford (2016, p. 293) indicates, 'is that the French visitors in the *Tel Quel* delegation are not being shown anything but generalities ... generalities that [do] nothing but hide the true social realities of China'.

The conclusion which Barthes reaches regarding the hidden nature of 'the true social realities of China' reflects a key concern that is also evident in the works of Yan Lianke, whose novels symbolically transform the underlying and (as Barthes discovered) wilfully hidden social reality of China into fiction. However, whilst I have previously argued that Yan addresses these underlying concerns in *The Explosion Chronicles* by opening up an imaginary space in which exposes them, Yan's use of the literary devices of an author surrogate and embedding are further positioned within the novel's overriding paratextual constructs which directly contravenes post-Barthesian criticism by placing the author (i.e., Yan Lianke) explicitly within the text itself.

By focusing on *The Explosion Chronicles*' paratextual constructs, a reading of the novel which aligns with Barthes's 'death of the author' is thus negated by Yan's inclusion of preludial and postludial paratexts which suggest that the author who, as Greaney states, 'precedes, produces, controls and limits textual meaning', has in fact reclaimed the role of 'the author' in the context of contemporary Chinese literature. Returning to Mikkonen's

definition of the use of author surrogate earlier in this chapter, Mikkonen (2013, p. 72) distinguishes that there also exists ‘a large group of literary works in which an individual character does not directly represent the author’s views but should rather be examined as part of the author’s overall assertive act’ and it is precisely within this framework that Yan’s use of an author surrogate and his paratext functions.

I highlight the paratext of *The Explosion Chronicles* because it is a significant example of Yan’s ‘overall assertive act’ within his works explored in this chapter. As has been previously noted, *The Explosion Chronicles* itself is a prototype for *The Day the Sun Died*. Moreover, the novel’s paratextual merging of fiction and reality is not only symbolic of the *Chronicles*’ own interplay between reality and fiction but also offers an imaginary space, akin to Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, within which Yan inverts the relationship between reality and fiction. In doing so, Yan creates a literary space of resistance from which his fiction challenges and questions the socio-political and economic development of China in the twentieth century. In order to draw out Yan’s interplay between reality and fiction in *The Explosion Chronicles*, the analysis that follows seeks to distinguish the novel’s paratextual inclusions from what I consider to be the secondary embedded narrative of the text.

Drawing on the framework set out by Gérard Genette (1977) in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, the following analysis of *The Explosion Chronicles* will consider how the structural composition of the text is produced in such a way as to juxtapose Yan’s paratextual inclusions with the novel’s secondary embedded narrative. By doing so in relation to *The Explosion Chronicles*’ primary narrative text, my analysis will thus show how Yan’s structural composition of an imaginary heterotopic space within the text not only challenges and questions the socio-political and economic development of China in the twentieth century but also provides an imaginary space which acts as a space of resistance against the artistic restraints of the CPC.

As we have seen, Yan's use of embedding in *The Explosion Chronicles* creates a structure which has an equivalent effect to the way in which Nelles (2010) defined, in which the fictionalised character of 'Yan Lianke' narrates the second narrative (i.e., embedded) text. This structure is akin to the postface of *The Day the Sun Died* in which Li Niannian implies that the inclusion of his family's narrative in the text signifies that the fictional Yan has completed his novel. This version of 'Yan Lianke' who, throughout the novel, stands on the periphery of Li Niannian's embedded narrative is thus revealed in the novel's postface to have been responsible for the writing of the '*Night of the People*', the text which Li Niannian invokes the fictional Yan to write at the opening of the novel, and is subsequently materially manifested to the reader as *The Day the Sun Died*. However, unlike the beginning of *The Day the Sun Died*, where the narrator-protagonist Li Niannian evokes (the fictional) Yan Lianke 'to finish writing his *Night of the People*' (p. 8), the 'Yan Lianke' of *The Explosion Chronicles* initiates the text as its primary narrator, leaving the reader under no illusion that the novel they are reading is in fact an embedded construct of a fictionalised Yan:

Esteemed readers, permit me to use this Note to clarify a few points. ... I agreed to put aside the novel on which I was working to accept the role of author and editor of *The Explosion Chronicles*. ... I spent quite a bit of time and effort on this project, not only for the sake of my readers and for Explosion City, but also to earn the vast sum of money specified in the contract. (pp. 1-2)

Hence, in each primary narrative, the narrative frame (i.e., the text which Yan either delivers or completes in the postface of each respective novel) is revealed as a fictionalised version of Yan Lianke's writing of the book.

Significantly, however, the narrative frame of *The Explosion Chronicles* (i.e., the embedded narrative) is structurally juxtaposed against what Genette (1977, p. 261) terms the 'paratext' of the novel, a construct which he defines as: 'the means by which a text makes a

book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public’.

From the above quotation by ‘Yan’, we can see that the physical production of the chronicles is a concern for the fictionalised Yan, both in terms of how the chronicles are presented to its readers and for its representation of Explosion, but also that it meets the criteria that ‘*The Explosion Chronicles* Editorial Board’ stipulates for Yan to receive ‘the enormous financial compensation’ offered by Explosion City: ‘a sum so large’, Yan reflects, that ‘it left me speechless’ (p. 1). This anxiety is not only reflected by a metatextual preface and postface written by the (fictional) Yan Lianke, which shows his concern for how *The Explosion Chronicles* is presented to its readers, but is framed by another narrative frame in the form of an ‘Author’s Note’ at the end of the book in which (the real-life) Yan Lianke positions the novel in relation to a literary practice that he calls ‘mythorealism, which he defines as the use of a non-realistic narrative style to explore contemporary China’s underlying reality’ (Rojas, 2017, pp. ix-x).

These multiple layers of narrative, demarcated by the novel’s paratext, allow (the real-life) Yan Lianke to create what Genette conceptualises as ‘a *threshold*, or ... a “vestibule” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back’ (quoted in Bushell, 2016, p. 182, emphasis in original), an option which Yan himself invites the reader to partake in the novel’s opening pages: ‘Read these chronicles! Even if only a few pages, it will be as if you deposited a flower on my grave!’ (p. 3). Once again, it is within this ‘threshold’ space, manufactured by the paratextual constructs of the novel, that the narrative frame is juxtaposed against the primary narrative text of Yan’s postface and wherein they function as heterotopic spaces.

As this chapter’s earlier inclusion of Barthes’s the ‘death of the author’ alludes to, Yan Lianke’s paratextual conclusion to *The Explosion Chronicles* suggests a deliberate attempt by the author to separate the novel’s integrative layers of narrative in order to invert

the relationship between the embedded narratives and their paratextual constructs. The effect of this thus challenges the reader to question the relationship between reality (i.e., the book's paratextual construction) and fiction (the novel's narrative proper).

This inversion of reality and fiction contained within the paratext of the novel countermands Greaney's (2006, p. 61) earlier-referred-to conclusions of post-Barthesian criticism precisely through Yan's employment of the threshold space which occurs between *The Explosion Chronicle*'s narrative frame and primary narrative text. For Genette and Maclean (1991, p. 267):

The definition of the paratext involves the necessity that someone should always be responsible for it. ... Any paratextual message for which the author and/or the editor assumes a responsibility which he cannot escape is *official*. Thus everything is official which, whether its source be the author or editor, is present in the anthumous paratext, like the title or the original preface; or then again the commentaries signed by the author or the editor in a work for which he takes complete responsibility. (emphasis in original)

Of the three writers at the forefront of this thesis, Yan Lianke is unique, as his embedded narratives within *The Explosion Chronicles* create a text in which his narrative continues into his paratext whilst retaining the 'official' status we attribute to Yan as the author of the work of which he is ultimately responsible. Furthermore, Yan's placement of the postface within the text itself, in which he ultimately concludes the primary narrative text, can also be understood in terms of Genette's theory. Using an example from the Western canon, Genette (1977, p. 171) argues that:

The choice between the two locations, preludial and postludial, is obviously not neutral. ... Walter Scott, entitling the last chapter of *Waverley* 'A Postscript, Which Should Have Been a Preface,' plays on this effect ... a little more ambiguously. ...

(he adds) people rarely read prefaces and often begin a book at the end; as a result, for those readers this postscript will serve as a preface.

More generally, however, it is also worth recognising – as Genette further highlights in recognition of wider concerns surrounding readership – that whether or not a reader’s completion of a text is measured by completion of the narrative or the narrative plus prelude and postlude material remains a source of ongoing debate.²⁷

Within the wider context of contemporary Chinese literature, few academic studies have sought to identify individual authors’ readerships, an effort made even more problematic in the context of censorship in China under which the CPC actively limits the publication of works whose themes concern topics such as the Party’s history, major historical events, or political issues. These themes are central to the Party’s ideology, and the Party still exercises pre-censorship on literature containing such topics. As specified in “Measures on the Recording of Important Topics of Books, Periodicals, Audio/Visual Productions and Electronic Publications” issued by the General Administration of Press and Publications in 1997, literature concerning these themes needs to be recorded by publishing units prior to the text’s publication.

In practices of censorship, the GAPP is meticulous, particularly with literature representing or based on important Chinese historical events, such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Adhering to the CPC’s conclusions on these events, the GAPP’s measures exist to detect and remove any overt or covert criticism of the Party contained in literature in order to maintain what the “Resolution on Major Issues

²⁷ Genette’s introduction notes that his study is limited as it ‘does not leave the limits of western culture’ (1977, p. 271) – perhaps, in the Chinese dialogue, Yan is illustrative of a vaster global dialogue within which the issues of paratextual material within books exist. See also: Altman et al. (2014, p. 23) and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2017), ‘Reading Reception in the Digital Era’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 28 June, Oxford University Press. Available at: <http://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-285> (Accessed: 16 February 2019).

Regarding the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society” enshrines as a ‘healthy ideological public opinion atmosphere’ for the purposes of ‘[enriching] the cultural life of the masses’. As the “Measures” outline, the publication and distribution of literature in defiance, violation or transgression of the official interpretation ‘shall be subject to administrative punishment’ and the offending literature withdrawn from publication and distribution.²⁸ According to Yan Lianke (2016, p. 269), this regime has similarly strategically shifted the direction of ‘independent-minded authors’ in such a way that ‘even if they do not write the sorts of ... works the regime desires, at the very least they won’t write ... negative works focusing on people’s misfortune and the dark side of the country’s history.’

In her case study of how this dichotomy has manifested itself in Chun Sue’s 春树 (b.1983) *Beijing Doll* (2005, translated by Howard Goldblatt), Rovira-Esteva (2016, p. 203) attempts to break down this paradox using paratext as a tool for comparative analysis, and approach which she claims, ‘is innovative since ... [paratexts] have never been used to carry out a deconstructive analysis of contemporary Chinese literature in translation’. Approaching *Beijing Doll* as a work in translation from a publisher’s perspective, Rovira-Esteva’s analysis correlates the paratextual elements of the text to Wardle’s (2012, p. 32) summary of the publisher’s marketing of the book: ‘[a]ll these paratexts mean that each publishing company can market what was once the same source text in their own way, each attempting to win over a targeted share of the potential readership’. Rovira-Esteva (2016, p. 202) illustrates how this dichotomy has resulted in Chun Sue’s work experiencing,

²⁸ For a partial English translation with the Chinese text of ‘Circular Regarding the Printing and Promulgation of the ‘Measures on the Recording of Important Topics of Books, Periodicals, Audio/Visual Productions and Electronic Publications’” see <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/circular-regarding-the-printing-and-promulgation-of-the-measures-on-the>; and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, ‘Party Uses Journalists, Artists, Academics To Promote ‘Harmonious Society’’, 8 December 2018, available at: <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/party-uses-journalists-artists-academics-to-promote-harmonious> (Accessed: 16 February 2019).

a significant shift from the periphery of the Chinese literary system to a more central position in the targeted literary systems. Her book is peripheral in the Chinese literary system partially because it has been banned by authorities, and yet it is precisely this “banned in China” label which has pushed it to a more central position in the target literary systems.

As this chapter’s earlier exposition of the reception of Yan’s recent publications suggests, a similar shift has affected the publication of his works and is one of the reasons why I argue that the paratextual constructs of *The Explosion Chronicles* are significant within the wider scope of his work, for it is within the ‘threshold’ spaces of this text that Yan employs as a space of resistance against the restraints of the CPC’s censorship. Ultimately, the paratextual inclusion of a postface at the novel’s conclusion constitutes the production of *The Explosion Chronicles* which we, as readers, ultimately consume, and it is in the novel’s conclusion that Yan symbolically transforms the fictitious censorship of the chronicles into an assertive act against the CPC’s ideological vision for literature in China.

The narrative proper of *Explosion*’s rise and fall concludes with Chapter 18, ‘Great Geographic Transformation (2)’, and is proceeded by a brief, closing postface in which (the fictional) ‘Yan Lianke’ meets *Explosion*’s city mayor, Kong Mingliang to deliver his completed manuscript. The meeting of Yan and Mingliang (who, we recall, was assassinated in Yan’s fictive treatment) begins amicably as both men, equivalently described by Yan as ‘in our fifties and of average height, and ... both [having] a square face’ (pp. 446-447), share a banquet hosted by Mayor Kong and exchange formalities before Yan submits his manuscript for the mayor’s approval. The next morning, Yan is summoned to the mayor’s office whereupon Mayor Kong, whose ‘face was livid, and [whose] mouth was clenched so tightly his lips were turning purple’ sets Yan’s newly completed manuscript alight and warns him that: ‘As long as *Explosion* and I are here, you shouldn’t even think about publishing this

book in China. If you try to publish this book anywhere outside China, you'll never be permitted to return to your hometown in the Balou Mountains as long as you live' (p. 448).

Just as Yan Lianke's works in China are the target of coercive censorial action in China's literary system, *The Explosion Chronicle*'s fictional mayor censures the author by not only destroying his work but also by threatening his ability to publish outwith China and, perhaps more sinisterly, his ability to return to his homeland. The parallels established by Yan's real and fictive illustrations of Explosion's development akin to China, which are symbolically reinforced by the author's descriptive parallels between him and the chronicle's main character, also reveals the effect of censorship in the chronicle's destruction as a microcosm of China's censorship apparatus; as a symbol of censorship, Mayor Kong's burning of Yan's manuscript thus simultaneously erases the history of Explosion.

The conclusion of *The Explosion Chronicles* thus fictionally reimagines the difficulties which Yan Lianke encounters whilst evaluating 'the cultural historical process of China's modernisation' and, more widely, highlights the challenges which contemporary Chinese writers encounter when addressing historical subjects inherent within the work of the post-1980s 'generation of intellectuals who were otherwise bold and daring in their attempts to challenge the *status quo*' (Qian, 2011, p. 17, emphasis added). Yet, as I have sought to highlight alongside the literary examples in this thesis, the wider political and historical contexts of China show that it 'is not a status quo country' (quoted in Gries, 2004, p. 11). Within this context, Herzberger (2001, p. 11) suggests that fiction's role in China thus seeks to open China to diversity and to empower the invented. Consequently, the traditions of reading and writing associated with Herzberg's conclusion are reflected by the way in which Yan Lianke makes use of history and fiction within *The Explosion Chronicles*. The novel's paratextual conclusion, in which the fictive Yan's chronicles are destroyed highlights how fiction can negotiate the 'official' historiography postulated under the CPC's authoritarian

censorship system, symbolically transforming the secondary embedded narrative into the story we are reading.

As I will show in this chapter's further analysis of Yan's *The Four Books*, the relationship between the reader and writer recurs as a thematic concern within the author's wider oeuvre, however, these concerns are explicitly manifested and developed within *The Explosion Chronicle*'s multiple layers of embedded and paratextual narratives. Furthermore, the relationship between the reader within the wider context of the Chinese literary tradition is raised by Kern and Hegel (2004, p. 167) who stress that Chinese literature:

has befallen not only the more technical issues involved in the history of literature but even some of the most basic concerns. Rarely do we see the fundamental questions that need to be asked anew for each period and genre, namely: what is a text, and what is a book? What is an author, and what kind of social performance is the composition of (however defined) "literature" in different periods under different circumstances?

In this chapter's reading of *The Explosion Chronicles*, we can begin to see an answer to some of these questions through Yan Lianke's inclusion of preludial and postludial paratexts, which suggest that the novel is a significant move by Yan within his 'overall assertive act' (Mikkonen, 2013, p. 72).

This 'overall assertive act', which Yan symbolically transforms within *The Explosion Chronicles* through Mayor Kong's censure of the chronicles, is reflected by the mayor's presumed victory in silencing Yan's fictive history of Explosion. Mayor Kong's triumph, however, is in fact mitigated and overcome by the novel's paratextual construction in which Yan's interplay of fiction and reality is transformed into the (real-life) Yan Lianke's book. Critically, this transformation, which occurs within the text's narrative and paratextual constructs, challenges Yan's readers to look beyond the novel's narrative proper to consider

how the CPC's ideological vision for China, symbolised by the authoritarian figure of Mayor Kong, is a nihilistic method by which to shape out the world. This is a world in which, *The Explosion Chronicles* show us, literature, following primarily the task of imagination and simulation (Altman et al., 2014, p. 28), is called upon to validate past events and grant them authenticity under the mechanisms of an authoritarian regime.

Complicity and Authorship in *The Four Books*

Notably, the censure of (the fictional) Yan Lianke's chronicles in *The Explosion Chronicles*' conclusion mirrors Yan's experience whilst attempting to publish his previous novel, *The Four Books*, which is illustrative of Yan's first major break from the censors and marks a new turn in how Chinese literature has framed the historical events of the Mao era (Veg, 2014, p. 10). First published in Hong Kong in 2010, after 'it was rejected by 20 publishers, all of whom understood that publishing it would mean they would be shut down' (Hilton, 2015), *The Four Books* is illustrative of another novel within the wider scope of this thesis which attempts to engage with the massive loss of life during the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, *The Four Books*' narrative centres on a group of intellectuals undergoing compulsory re-education in a sprawling labour reform camp ('Zone 99') in the New Education District by the Yellow River.

The narrative consists of sixteen chapters, told through fragments of the four fictional 'books' referenced in the novel's title, two of which are written by the Author: a character identified according to his former profession, alongside his fellow inmates, similarly referred to throughout the text as: the Musician, the Scholar, the Theologian, and the Technician. As Chambers (2015, p. 56) highlights, *The Four Books*' main 'conceit is that it is an assemblage of four different texts by ... three authors, edited into the titular four books', namely:

Criminal Records, reports on his fellow inmates recorded by the Author under order from ‘the Child’; *Heaven’s Child*, an anonymous biblically-worded text which, Laifong Leung (2011, p. 79) suggests, borrows from the rhetoric of Genesis to present an omniscient critique of the deification of Mao; *Old Course*, the Author’s 500-page novel written alongside *Criminal Records*, which presents a more candid and scathing account of the dehumanising toil within the re-education camp, and *A New Myth of Sisyphus*, an unfinished and unattributed philosophical meditation on human action and divine punishment.

While this chapter has previously highlighted works in which resistance to the authoritarian regime of the CPC is facilitated by Yan’s use of a fictive embedded author, in *The Four Books*, the act of writing itself is symbolically transformed into an act of resistance against authoritarian control through the character of ‘the Author’. As *The Four Books*’ narrative unfolds, the Author records his experience of the re-education camp at the bequest of ‘the Child’: a preadolescent party officer in charge of the re-education camp, who delights in draconian rules, monitoring the intellectual inmates’ behaviour and confiscating their smuggled books.

Whilst scholars, such as Veg (2014) and Leung (2011), have tended to focus on *The Four Books*’ historical context, and consequently, the novel as a critique of the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing disasters of the famine and the Cultural Revolution that followed, the technique by which Yan juxtaposes the characters of the Child and the Author has been seemingly overlooked. This omission is particularly striking given that this dynamic directly ‘reflects on issues of literary production and political supervision’ (Rojas, 2015, p. vii), two issues which, as we have seen in the concluding scene of *The Explosion Chronicles*, are once again symbolically reiterated by Yan in his fictional counterpart’s confrontation with Kong Mingliang. As I will show in the analysis that follows vis-à-vis the transaction which occurs between the Child and the Author, this oversight of analysis in *The Four Books* highlights the

act of writing as resistance and contributes to what Veg (2014) terms as Yan's first major break from the censors.

The transaction and subsequent concession of the Author to write '*Criminal Records*' within the narrative is also one which Yan rallied against whilst himself writing *The Four Books*, and accounts for the novel's banning in China, despite Yan's increasing influence within his own country and abroad (Rojas, 2015, p. xii).²⁹ Speaking in an interview with Gupta Suman in 2008 whilst writing the Chinese version of *The Four Books*, Yan addressed the transactional relationship between artistic direction and state control in mainland China, in which he reflected that:

I worry that in my writing I will unconsciously modify my standing and my artistic direction — that I will compromise in some way without realising it, so that my writing will change in a way in which it shouldn't. ... In my new novel writing I am trying to find a balance between these two imperatives, ... [a]nd yet, I worry that this balancing is itself effectively a compromise, is a regressive step in my writing.

Whether this is true I can only determine after the work is finished. (p. 34)

Whilst Yan's concern about compromising his standing and artistic direction is manifested in the transaction between the Child and the Author, I suggest that the metaphor Yan uses of the 'balance between these two imperatives' is not fully realised until his subsequent writing and publication of *The Explosion Chronicles*, in which, this chapter suggests, Yan manifests within his writing Foucault's concept of heterotopia to highlight the novel's central conceit of bypassing state censorship. However, no such overt conceit exists within *The Four Books*

²⁹ Veg (2014, p. 15) notes that *The Four Books* 'was published in Hong Kong and Taiwan and circulated in pirated editions and on the Chinese Internet', as well as being 'circulated in semi-public venues within China (2015, p. 209). Nevertheless, following its ban in the mainland, the extent of the novel's circulation in China, as Lim and Wasserstrom (2012, emphasis added) suggest, remains limited to a small minority of readers already familiar with Yan or his work: '[Yan] even resorted to privately printing copies of his latest work, "Four Books", for circulation among friends, bypassing state control'. See also: Lynda Ng (2015), 'China's Elusive Truths: Censorship, Value and Literature in the Internet Age', in *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary: A Global View*, edited by Nicole Moore, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 233-246.

and, whilst it would be tenuous to propose a reading of the novel as illustrative of Foucault's heterotopias – akin to this chapter's earlier readings of Yan's successive novels – *The Four Books* is illustrative of a broader change in Yan's writing: one which is not, as Yan fears, 'a regressive step', but which shows the development of his literature in finding a balance between his standing and artistic direction without compromising his writing.

The broader change in Yan's writing, as illustrated by *The Four Books*, is symbolically manifested in the transaction between the Child and the Author. In order to draw out how this transaction is symbolically transformed into an act of resistance against the authoritarianism of censorship in China, I will approach the novel from two aspects: first, to briefly consider the role of the Child in the novel as an enforcer of 'the higher-ups' authority and as a metaphor of political supervision, and secondly, to illustrate the Author's response to the Child's directive. In doing so, my reading of *The Four Books* shows how Yan's composition of the relationship between the Author and the Child functions as a symbolic representation of the censorship mechanisms of the CPC as it relates to literary production and political supervision of contemporary literature in China.

In his essay "Creating a Literary Space to Debate the Mao Era", Veg (2014, pp. 11-12) notes that '[t]he Child is a puzzling character. ... who wholeheartedly believes in the system and is prepared to sacrifice himself to it'. Drawing from Tsai Chien-hsin's (2011) analysis of the novel, Veg (2014, p. 12) argues that the Child's trajectory, supported by 'the biblical simplicity of his Mao-like pronouncements, ... raises the question ... of whether, and how the Party can atone for its sins'.³⁰ Aside from *The Four Books*' title, which alludes to both the canonical texts of Confucianism and to the four Gospels of the Bible (Veg, 2014, p. 14), the trajectory of the Child from the naïve enforcer of the 'higher-ups' draconian rules to

³⁰ See: Tsai Chien-hsin (2011), 'The Museum of Innocence: The Great Leap Forward and Famine, Yan Lianke, and *Four Books*', *MCLC*. Available at: <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/museum-of-innocence/> (Accessed: 25 February 2019).

his sacrificial crucifixion – whereby ‘the Child [nails] himself to a cross covered with red blossoms’ (Yan Lianke, 2015, p. 325), thus allowing the re-education camp’s inmates to leave the compound (p. 329) – has particular implications for a reading of the text which correlates the Child as a metaphor for the authoritarianism of the CPC.

Read as such, *The Four Books* is reflection of a wider exploration of history against the system of ‘national amnesia’ than Lim (2014) theorises is pursued by the CPC. Following the English publication of *The Four Books* in 2015, this concern was explicitly referred to by Yan Lianke in a review of the novel published in the *Guardian*, in which he is quoted saying ‘that he hopes a memorial to amnesia engraved with all China’s nation’s powerful memories of the past century could one day be erected on Tiananmen Square’ (Hilton, 2015). The ideological underpinnings of the Child over the course of the novel are gradually broken down and are emphasised by his reports on the re-education compound’s inmates to the higher-ups in Beijing, at the geographical centre of which lies Tiananmen Square.

This contrast is illustrated upon the Child’s first return from the capital whereby he proclaims to the inmates that “‘I have just returned ... and will now announce the ten commandments.’” Then he proceeded to read the commandments. They were ten prohibitions, including: [...] Thou shalt not read or write unnecessarily, nor think unnecessarily’ (*The Four Books*, 2015, p. 2) and, later in the novel, when the Child, questioning the Author on the production levels of wheat in the compound, ‘explained that the higher-ups were pressuring him’ (p. 195). Addressing the narrative trajectory of the Child over the course of *The Four Books* in an interview with the *South China Morning Post*, Yan Lianke reflected upon the symbolism of the character, whom he regards as ‘a unique presence not only in the novel, but also in Chinese literature, and even world literature. He is Evil but also a God. He can be Hitler or Mao. He is a very complex character who [is] both naïve, and equally capable of evil and good’ (quoted in Wong, 2016).

Whilst I have shown how the Child loyally reiterates Mao-like pronouncements to the inmates, ultimately, his capability of being ‘equally ... evil and good’ is fatefully illustrated by his sacrifice in defying the ‘higher-ups’ and providing a means of escape for the re-education compound’s inmates. By now turning to consider the transaction between the Child and Author at the beginning of *The Four Books*, I will show how the Child’s act of atonement is a manifestation of his role as a symbolic representation of literary production and political supervision, whilst also considering the consequences of this control from the perspective of the Author.

Following his pronouncement mentioned earlier, in which he prohibits the re-education camp’s inmates from reading or writing, nor thinking unnecessarily, the Child, whose ability to find prohibited books smuggled into the compound by its intellectual inmates makes him ‘[appear] to be omniscient’ (*The Four Books*, 2015, p. 16), charges the Author with the task of chronicling the activities of the other inmates within Zone 99 (*Criminal Records*) so that he can present a thorough record to his superiors. In return, the Child promises the Author that he will be permitted to return home if he provides enough incriminating material about his peers:

The higher-ups have proposed a title, which is *Criminal Records*. They say that each chapter should be fifty pages long, and ask that whenever you finish fifty pages you turn them in and they will give you another fifty blank sheets of paper. They say that as long as you finish this book, not only will they allow you to return to the provincial seat to be reunited with your family, but they will have the book printed and distributed throughout the country. They will reassign you to the capital, to be the leader of the country’s writers. (p. 12)

Mirroring the threat which Kong Mingliang levels at Yan Lianke in the conclusion to *The Explosion Chronicles* (“If you try to publish this book ... you’ll never be permitted to return

to your hometown ... as long as you live”’, p. 448), the Child’s charge to the Author is a metaphor for the mechanisms of literary censorship in mainland China. Reflecting the targets of the CPC’s censorship apparatus the offer made by the higher-ups to ‘give’ the Author another fifty sheets of paper per completed chapter reflects contemporary Chinese publications within the mainland that adhere to the CPC’s ideological guidelines for literature.

By compromising the potential content of his book, the title of which is already predetermined by the higher-ups (*‘Criminal Records’*), the Author enters into an agreement whereby the return investment on his work (i.e., ‘fifty blank sheets of paper’) is nominally guaranteed. Furthermore, the higher-up’s request is followed by a caveat in which the Author is promised premature release from the re-education compound and guarantees him preferential treatment in the process of literary production, as well as social and cultural standing as ‘the leader of the country’s writers’ in Beijing, provided that the Author meets the criteria established by the political ideology of his supervisors.

Although the Author enters into the agreement to watch over the other inmates of Zone 99 and deliver weekly written reports to the Child, thus becoming complicit in ‘single-handedly pocket[ing] the benefits of his snitching’ (Veg, 2014, p. 12), the anxiety of what he should include and/or omit within *Criminal Records* soon becomes apparent. A point of detail in this regard is the Author’s first response to his anxiety, whereby he reflects upon the wider political environment of the Mao era in which he and his fellow inmates find themselves: ‘I was keenly aware that we were in a state of political turmoil. [...] “If you’re afraid that your handwriting might be recognized, you can simply imitate someone else’s, write with your left hand, or even write with your eyes closed”’ (*The Four Books*, 2015, p. 20). The Author’s initial response to ‘write with [his] eyes closed’ in the context of this environment appears to

function as a metaphor for the act of self-censorship: an act of writing which Yan Lianke exercised whilst writing *Dream of Ding Village*.³¹

In his essay, “An Examination of China’s Censorship System”, Yan (2016, p. 270) illustrates how ‘self-censorship arises out of an environment of terror, anxiety and fear, and while it is predicated on unwillingness and resistance, it eventually [generates] a kind of intuitive response’. Once again, the mechanisms of China’s censorship apparatus are played out following the transaction between the Child and the Author as the latter’s anxiety is manifested in his impulse to write an alternate account of Zone 99:

I would get so anxious to write that my hands would become covered in sweat. [...] I didn’t want to write anything else for the Child and the higher-ups—not half a page, or even a few lines. Instead, I wanted to use this ink and paper to write what I really wanted to write. ... I wanted to write a true book. I didn’t know what that book would be, but I was determined to write it nevertheless. (*The Four Books*, 2015, p. 188)

At this point in the narrative, the compromise which the Author accepts in his agreement with the higher-up’s commission of *Criminal Records* is overcome and, no longer willing to chronicle the prescribed narrative of the higher-ups, his response is to compose another, ‘true’, text entitled *Old Course*. Thus, the Author’s act of self-censorship in the earlier course of the novel is inverted: his composition of *Old Course* becomes a means of resistance whilst also functioning as a symbolic manifestation of the means by which the Author is finally able to confront his own complicity in the higher-up’s system and understand his role as a ‘writer’.

³¹ Intended as a carefully documented account of the AIDS crisis in Henan, Yan adopted fiction as a less ‘dangerous’ form than the intended documentary account of his research (Veg, 2007, p. 68). Following the novel’s publication in 2006, Yan has since given multiple interviews in which he reflects upon the effect self-censorship had on his sense of his role as a writer whilst writing *Dream of Ding Village* in relation to the Chinese censorship apparatus. See, for example, Jonathan Watts (2006), ‘Censors sees through writer’s guile in tale of China’s blood-selling scandal’, *The Guardian*, 9 October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/09/books.china> (Accessed: 25 February 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter considers the fictional reflections of history in the works of Yan Lianke and argues that Yan's fiction exhibits what I term as 'imagined spaces of resistance' in order to illuminate the realities behind the official narratives of history posited by the CPC. Yan's work, I suggest, differs from the work of Mo Yan and Ma Jian because his novels exhibit a new direction in Chinese literature by which Chinese writers can use the constructs of metafiction as a tool in order to circumvent the censorship mechanisms existent within China.

By comparing the ideology of the 'Chinese Dream' in *The Day the Sun Died* alongside the Western reception of the novel, this chapter highlights the role which the Western reception of contemporary Chinese fiction holds in interpreting the modus operandi of the author. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates through its analysis of recent reviews of the novel, and interviews with the author himself, how interpretations of Yan's work are trenchantly linked to Western perspectives which correlate Yan's fiction as the product of an author who – in his more recent fiction – tends to exhibit more critical reflections of history within his work. Reflecting qualitative discussion with Yan Lianke, I present within this chapter insights into Yan's own intentions of *The Day the Sun Died* which reinforce the chapter's focus in showing how his fiction works to establish 'imagined spaces of resistance' under the system of literary control established by the CPC.

In the chapter's subsequent analysis of *The Day the Sun Died*, *The Explosion Chronicles* and *The Four Books*, I draw on the framework proposed by Chambers, who argues that Yan Lianke's fiction is reflective of what he defines as 'literary care', in which Chambers posits that Yan's writing never neglects the relationship between life and politics but maintains that one is not reducible to the other. Where Chambers' thesis proposes that Yan's literary techniques are solely preoccupied with the author's 'literary care' in the face of

self-censorship, this chapter develops Chambers' theory by suggesting that broadly defined constructions of the novel contribute to a more nuanced reading of Yan's recent fiction.

The chapter thus looks to the construction of Yan's novels, and suggests that his work is evident of a new development within contemporary Chinese fiction which emphasises the role of the author alongside the content of the narrative text. Here, I take, for example, the paratextual construct of *The Day the Sun Died* and *The Explosion Chronicles*. In each of these texts, I show how the narrative proper is contained as an 'imagined space' within the overall creative construct of the novel; the paratextual post- and prefaces to each novel, I argue, are employed by Yan in an effort to act as a continued literary space in which the author reflects the socio-political constructs of contemporary China against the imaginary interpretations of the 'fictionalised' China presented within each of these works. In its analysis of how Yan Lianke develops the paratextual construction of the novel, this chapter argues that Yan exhibits a uniquely literary response to the censorship mechanisms of the CPC, and that his writing has developed in such a way over a prolonged period of literary creation in which he has, in his previous works, been subject to and complicit in the act of self-censoring his own writing.

While this chapter considers and contributes to the existing literature on the use, and implications, of the paratextual constructs of the Chinese novel,³² further research is needed to identify if this system of literary resistance is evident and practiced in the paratexts of other works in the fiction of a wider range of contemporary Chinese writers; if so, the implications may suggest that the creative framework of Yan's fiction is fundamentally significant in ascribing within the contemporary Chinese literature a means by which the author might be

³² See, for example, Frances Weightman (2018), 'Authoring the Strange: The Evolving Notions of Authorship in Prefaces to Classical Supernatural Fiction', *East Asian Publishing and Society*, 8, pp. 34-55.

able to successfully circumvent, through fiction, the CPC's ideological guidelines and mechanisms of literary censorship which exist in China today.

Conclusion

‘The Re-presentation of History in the Works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke’ is an attempt to analyse how contemporary Chinese authors incorporate reference to significant historical events in literature under the context of authoritarian censorship in China. The previous chapters have examined the ways in which allusions to historically significant events are reflected, interpreted and represented in the works of three Chinese authors whose historical fiction has not been collectively examined in the field of Chinese literary studies to date.

This thesis has explored a number of themes: how history is symbolically reflected in contemporary Chinese literature in the post-1989 period; the differences between Mo Yan’s, Ma Jian’s and Yan Lianke’s fiction in their collective approach to the wider historio-political circumstances of each of their works’ respective contexts; and the relationship between State suppression and the role of fiction in China. By investigating these issues, this thesis has stressed the significance of the representation of history in the literature of these authors, and their works’ role in offering an alternate representations of history from the official narrative posited by the CPC. It has illustrated how, alongside the development of Chinese modernity in the twentieth century, the theorisation of literary modernity helped to shape and influence, for example, the development of the social function of fiction, the ongoing cyclical relationship between Chinese literature and history, as well as how history itself is symbolically transformed into literature in the work of contemporary Chinese authors. The summary which follows reflects the findings presented in the conclusions to each chapter of this study.

Summary of Findings

The first chapter of this thesis establishes the theoretical context of this study in order to contextualise how the representation of significant historical events in the works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke function under the censorship apparatus of the Chinese government. At the heart of this exploration is the idea that the year 1989 marked the end of the period of cultural critique in which Chinese intellectuals played an important role and opening up windows towards the outside world in post-Mao China. This is reflected in the periodization of recent anthologies of modern Chinese literature, such as Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt's *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (2007) and Yunte Huang's *The Big Red Book of Modern Chinese Literature: Writings from the Mainland in the Long Twentieth Century* (2017), which unequivocally conclude prior to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, but fail to incorporate a works produced after the June Fourth crackdown.

The distinction between Chinese literature of the twentieth century and that which precedes it in the post-1989 period is important in our understanding of how later writers, such as Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke in Chapters Two and Three negotiate the effective erasure of significant events in recent Chinese history within their fiction. In Chapter Two, I turn to the works of Mo Yan to show how his fiction's representation of significant historical events in China's twentieth century offer a salient critique of the social and political vicissitudes of China which are still at the forefront of contemporary writers' concerns. Mo Yan's ability to reflect upon the politically problematic narrative of China's twentieth century is unique in contemporary Chinese literature. As China's Nobel Laureate, he is among the few Chinese writers who exhibits a readership both within China's borders and beyond whilst, significantly, using the genre of magical realism to reflect upon the problems facing China in his fiction.

Mo Yan's work is often compared to Lu Xun, another eminent modernist writer and critic of early twentieth-century China, whom I refer to earlier in this thesis (and briefly now discuss). Lu Xun arrived in Japan in 1902 in order to study medicine at the Sendai Medical Academy (now the medical school of Tohoku University). Lu Xun's time in Japan was marred by financial and personal uncertainty, which appeared to impact his writing. In response to a vernacular poem that Lu Xun had published under the pseudonym of Tang Si, 'the first critical evaluation given to Lu Xun in Japan described him as 'banal'' (Lee, 1985, p. 217). Nevertheless, upon his eventual return to China in 1909, Lu Xun's first intellectual concern was 'the source of China's sickness' (Pusey, 1998, p. 10) which he later addressed in *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q Zhengzhuan*, 1921), considered a masterpiece of modern Chinese literature for its utilisation of Vernacular Chinese in the wake of the 1919 May 4th Movement (Luo, 2004, p. 84; Foster, 2008, p. 199).

The critical spirit of Lu Xun's work, supported by his geographic displacement from China in the twentieth century, recurs throughout the fiction of the three authors whom I highlight as case studies in this thesis. Whilst it may not be helpful to suggest that a parabola of difficulty exists in authors' abilities to produce critical fiction outside China (such as Ma Jian) from those that write from within (i.e., Mo Yan), it is useful to consider how the geographical placement of this thesis' primary authors are reflected in their ability to represent historical events in their fiction which differ from the 'official' narrative of Chinese history promoted by the CPC. In an interview with Alec Ash, Ma Jian (2012) reflects that his geographic displacement from China affords him the ability to imbue within his work significant historic events which he would otherwise not be able to write about in mainland China:

When I write my novels, my first concern is that I live in England, so I have the freedom to write. If I were in China, I would know what I couldn't publish or would

be persecuted for, and I would be controlled by that. In England, I can write whatever I like. So I write about sensitive topics precisely because I have the freedom to, and therefore the obligation.

As I show in Chapter Three's analysis of *Beijing Coma*, Ma Jian's authorship is illustrative of a writer placed geographically outwith China who is predominantly concerned with reflecting upon, and representing within his fiction, the factuality of 'sensitive topics', or significant historic events in China which have been embedded within the national amnesia of the CPC's censorship apparatus. Ma Jian's fiction rarely, if ever, shies away from politically contentious topics. His works directly reference sensitive historical events, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre and the Cultural Revolution, a decision which has ensured that his work – and the author himself – remain banned in mainland China to this day.

In contrast, in the fourth chapter's discussion of Yan Lianke's works, I argue that, unlike Ma Jian, Yan Lianke's fiction exhibits a more nuanced approach to its historical referents. One reason for this, I suggest, is Yan's own experience and admission of self-censorship in his previous works: a concern which is symbolically manifested in *The Four Books*, wherein the character of the Author resists the ideological commission from 'the higher-ups' and, instead, produces an alternative novel, illustrating both his own awareness of his complicity but also his role as a 'writer' under an authoritarian regime.

In my analysis of his recent fiction – similar to the Author's growing awareness of the construction of texts in *The Four Books* – I show how Yan emphasises the construction of fictional texts, placing emphasis on the author alongside the narrative and paratextual construction of his novels. I highlight Yan's use of paratextual post- and prefaces in *The Day the Sun Died* and *The Explosion Chronicles* as examples of how Yan contains within the narrative proper an 'imagined space' in which the author can reflect the socio-political concerns of contemporary China. The co-mingling of fact and fiction, even within the

paratextual construction of his books, is a method by which Chinese writers have been able to effectively circumvent the censorship apparatus and ideological guidelines for literature established by the CPC.

One problem which I note while discussing Yan Lianke's work is the critical reception of contemporary Chinese fiction within Western readerships which tend to favour ideological underpinnings within contemporary Chinese fiction. By comparing the 'Chinese Dream' policy with *The Day the Sun Died*, I attempt to show how the reality of critical discourse in China determines that this dialogue is limited by wider factors far outwith the control of any individual author. For Yan, the novel's reception by Western readers as a critique of Xi Jinping's underlying political strategy was surprising. This thesis offers a critical analysis of *The Day the Sun Died* which argues that the novel develops Yan's previous attempt in *The Explosion Chronicles* to embed within his oeuvre a significant contribution to the field of Chinese literature, a renewed emphasis on the role of the author and the significance of the construction of narrative fiction itself.

Science Fiction: Forging New Futures?

While I give primacy throughout this thesis to the representation of significant historical events in the works of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke, I make reference in Chapter Three, in agreement with Ives (2018), that Ma Jian's novel *China Dream* as 'a political allegory of [China's] modern self' in response to 'the great rejuvenation' of the nation promoted by Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream'. In *China Dream*'s closing chapters, the novel's anti-hero, Ma Daode, reflects on the past excesses of the Cultural Revolution: "Soon every dream about the Culture Revolution will be eradicated. ... If all goes to plan, the nightmares that plague our minds will be swept away and replaced with the brand new China Dream. You and I will

be able to forget past sorrows and forge new futures for ourselves!’” (2018, p. 160). Ma Daode’s obsession with controlling the past manifests itself in the eradication of traumatic memories and pursuit of the ‘new future’ offered by the China Dream. This study primarily focuses on the historical novels of its three authors, but it would be fitting to end this thesis by turning briefly to the growing genre of science fiction in China, in order to illustrate how literary visions of China’s future are shaping our understanding of China’s present social, cultural, and technological transformations and how the genre of science fiction is attracting a renewed international readership of Chinese literature.

The resurgence in the genre of science fiction in China is illustrated, for example, by Liu Cixin’s 刘慈欣 (b.1963) *San Ti* (*The Three-Body Problem*, 2008), in which the China of the future still exists under the socio-political institutions similar to the present, and Chen Qiufan’s 陈楸帆 (b.1981) *Huang Chao* (*The Waste Tide*, 2013), which portrays a future vision of China so dark and uncertain that fellow novelist Han Song 韩松 (b.1965) said of the novel: ‘This is a future that will make a young person feel the death of idealism’ (quoted in Chen, 2016, p. 372). In his introduction to the science fiction anthology, *Invisible Planets* (2016), Ken Liu 刘宇昆 (b.1976) makes the observation that the Chinese literary tradition of voicing dissent and criticism through the use of literary metaphor is but one of the purposes for which writers write and for which readers read. Liu (2016, p. 16) argues that science fiction novels, such as *The Three-Body Problem* and *The Waste Tide*, are suggestive that:

today’s Chinese writers are concerned with humanism; with globalization; with technological advancement; with tradition and modernity; with disparities in wealth and privilege; with development and environmental preservation; with history, rights, freedom, and justice; with family and love; with the beauty of expressing sentiment through words; with language play; with the grandeur of science; with the thrill of discovery; with the ultimate meaning of life.

The fiction produced in China reflects the complexity of the environment, and new frontiers in Chinese literature offer new opportunities to assess how writers address and interpret the social, cultural and technological changes in China outwith the genre of the historic novel. Developing this research into different genres could help to articulate how other Chinese writers interpret Chinese history, thus allowing for a more expansive reassessment of the role that different genres of contemporary Chinese fiction play in reflecting significant historical events within Chinese literature than has hitherto been made.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, recent Chinese fiction yields a unique insight into the role that writers and literature play in beginning to potentially unravel and overcome the apparently insurmountable odds of repression from within the restrictive confines of an authoritarian state. This thesis responds to Lovell's (2012) grouping of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke and contributes to this discussion by considering three Chinese writers whose works have not been discussed as a collective or as credible reflections of contemporary Chinese history coming out of China in the academic literature to date; if we recognise that 1989 marked a crucial turning point in how Chinese authors interpret history through literature then it follows that the relationship between the author, literature and history cannot be an isolated one. For the authors whose works I analyse in this thesis, the reassessment of China's modern history is deeply at work in the respective representations of significant historic events within their fiction. Within the context of the authoritarianism of the CPC, the representation of politically significant events in the historic novels of Mo Yan, Ma Jian and Yan Lianke offer a means by which Chinese writers in the post-1989 period may be able to regain control of and, as in Ma Jian's work, openly confront the state-sponsored editing of history and erasure of memory evident in China today.

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